

**SUSTAINING FEMINIST FILM CULTURES: AN INSTITUTIONAL HISTORY OF  
*WOMEN MAKE MOVIES***

by

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This dissertation presents an institutional history of the feminist film and media organization Women Make Movies (WMM) from its founding as a collective in the 1970s through the present and is the first comprehensive examination of the history of the organization itself. Drawing on the archival history of WMM—materials ranging from old newsletters, scrap paper, and correspondence to tax returns and board meeting minutes—this dissertation illuminates the past and present of this influential institution in broader social contexts, narratives of cultural history, and sets of political tensions.

Critically situating WMM's history reveals how the organization's transformations over time are imbricated in a number of larger historical tendencies. More specifically, these tendencies include evolving concerns about the role of visual media in education and feminist and social movements; fluctuating political and economic climates and their impact on independent media and non-profit arts organizations; changing media technologies and their effects on production and distribution; shifting interests, successes, and difficulties of social movements; and transforming conditions around the contemporary production of images, their circulation, and effects in a globalized media space. Moreover, this project argues that WMM was important for the growth of Film and Women's Studies as academic disciplines and remains a significant force in shaping how we think about the past, present, and future of feminist moving image culture. Thus, this project enables productive lenses for a number of intellectual projects,

including interdisciplinary discourses around women, gender, sexuality, and identity; economies and histories of the arts; studies of transnational media production and reception; and the relation between cultural history and institutions that create, distribute, or preserve media.

This project historicizes and culturally situates WMM to better understand its place in histories of independent film and feminism, its extensive influence in education and media culture, and its role in shaping trajectories of global feminist media practices.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>PREFACE.....</b>	<b>VIII</b>
<b>INTRODUCTION.....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>1.0 MISTRESSING THE APPARATUS .....</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>1.1 WMM PREHISTORY .....</b>	<b>20</b>
<b>1.2 WMM AS PRODUCTION COLLECTIVE: THE FIRST FIVE FILMS....</b>	<b>30</b>
<b>1.3 THE CHELSEA PICTURE STATION.....</b>	<b>34</b>
<b>2.0 FEMINIST MEDIA GROUPS AND THE POLITICS OF DIFFERENCE.....</b>	<b>65</b>
<b>2.1 CONFERENCE OF FEMINIST MEDIA ORGANIZATIONS.....</b>	<b>71</b>
<b>2.2 FEMINIST COALITIONS IN THE 1970S.....</b>	<b>94</b>
<b>2.3 “JUST A MOOD”? : THE POLITICS OF FEMINIST ORGANIZING ....</b>	<b>105</b>
<b>3.0 CINEMA OF IMMEDIACY.....</b>	<b>121</b>
<b>3.1 THE IMPACT OF <i>HEALTHCARING</i> .....</b>	<b>143</b>
<b>3.2 DISTRIBUTION AT WMM.....</b>	<b>159</b>
<b>4.0 IDEOLOGY AND INSTITUTIONALIZATION .....</b>	<b>164</b>
<b>4.1 CETA AND ORGANIZATIONAL (IN)STABILITY .....</b>	<b>180</b>
<b>4.2 IDEOLOGICAL RETRENCHMENT AND “THE CULTURE WARS” ..</b>	<b>185</b>
<b>4.3 MOVING THROUGH CRISIS: WMM RESTRUCTURES .....</b>	<b>195</b>
<b>5.0 VITALITY AND VIABILITY .....</b>	<b>229</b>

<b>5.1</b>	<b>THE INSTITUTIONAL MARKET.....</b>	<b>246</b>
<b>5.2</b>	<b>WMM IN A TRANSNATIONAL CONTEXT.....</b>	<b>261</b>
	<b>BIBLIOGRAPHY.....</b>	<b>278</b>

## **PREFACE**

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This project simply would not have been possible without the access to materials and generosity of spirit that the fantastic people at Women Make Movies provided, and I owe them



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## INTRODUCTION

One of the interesting directions pursued in Film Studies in recent years involves what some have referred to generally as “looking beyond the screen”—in other words, ways of looking at moving image culture beyond film texts themselves. A dimension of this movement that is particularly valuable is the production of historical studies of the kinds of institutions that have been crucial to the growth of the field, and are also significant forces in shaping how we think about the past, present, and future of moving image culture. My research seeks to contribute to this growing area. This project presents a critical institutional history of Women Make Movies (henceforth WMM), an influential film organization that has been developing media by and about women for more than four decades.

As the organization emerged in New York in 1969, WMM’s young idealistic co-founders imagined it as a production collective and community-based media education center, with the specific aim to teach women the technical skills needed to make their own films and videos. This mission to empower women through filmmaking was established as part of and in response to the “second wave” American feminist movement’s struggle against cultural, political, and gender inequalities, and especially in response to the ways that television, movies, and other visual media perpetuated those inequalities. Like other media organizations founded at the time, WMM affirmed the premise that giving the means of production to people who would not ordinarily have access to them was a valuable tool for social change. Unlike most analogous

cultural groups that formed at the cusp of two turbulent decades in American history, WMM endured the 1970s, eventually became an internationally acclaimed institution for women and the arts, and continues to thrive and sustain feminist film cultures today. This is a rather unique achievement, given that so many analogous organizations that were founded during this dynamic moment of change in U.S. history have since closed down, and many alternative and independent film groups have confronted a host of challenges related to funding, censorship, technological change, and institutional sustainability.<sup>1</sup>

WMM's remarkable longevity suggests that the organization has continually and strategically transformed itself over time to adapt to changing political, economic, and cultural conditions in order to remain viable as a self-sustaining, independent media organization that is largely exempt from corporate and state pressures in the present.<sup>2</sup> Significantly, WMM has done so while remaining steadfast in its commitment to feminism—through its film distribution collection itself, but also through broader cultural scenarios such as education and the academy, exhibition at museums and international film festivals, and networks of advocacy. Paralleling the increasingly globalized space of visual media, the rising visibility of documentary cinema in the public sphere, the influx of international, women's, and documentary film festivals, and the increased use of film in educational settings, WMM has also grown, in more recent years, to occupy a rather influential position in a sphere of international independent cinema.

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<sup>1</sup> Canyon Cinema, for example, holds an invaluable collection of more than 3500 8mm, 16mm, and 35mm films from avant-garde and experimental film history, and just around four percent of Canyon's titles are available on DVD—the preferred format for many institutions starting in the 1990s. In 2012, Canyon restructured to become the Canyon Cinema Foundation. For an excellent history of the organization, see Scott MacDonald, *Canyon Cinema: the Life and Times of an Independent Film Distributor* (University of California Press, 2008).

<sup>2</sup> I say “largely exempt” because a small percentage of WMM's income comes from government entities such as the New York State Council on the Arts and the National Endowment for the Humanities. Grants from these organizations are important for WMM's longevity, as they are often used to develop new programming or special projects, but they are not the dominant source of organizational funding. Matters related to funding and grants are discussed in chapters four and five.

Many scholars, librarians, programmers, curators, and others who work in education (in Film Studies and beyond), the festival circuit, and the non-profit arts sector recognize WMM for its feminist film distribution service, and many women directors know it for its services and resources related to independent filmmaking. This project is the first comprehensive examination of WMM's history as organization and as a kind of repository for women's media history.<sup>3</sup> Although I discuss a small number of films throughout the various chapters, the central materials are primary archival documents from WMM's own papers and records, ranging from memos, newsletters, film lists, meeting minutes, and correspondence, to 990 tax returns and grant applications, to press clipping paste-ups and handwritten notes scrawled on legal pads.

This project is an attempt to historicize and culturally situate WMM, to better understand its place in film, feminist, and American history, its extensive influence in education and culture, and its role in shaping trajectories of international feminist media practices. By attending to the material objects from WMM's history beyond the films themselves, the sheer documentation in this project is also a way of paying tribute to the contributions and labor of numerous individuals—the co-founders, staff and board members, filmmakers, collective members, interns, teachers, scholars, librarians, programmers, and a passionate longtime executive director, Debra Zimmerman—who have worked to define and redefine WMM over the years, and shape a significant place for it in histories of film, culture, and feminism.

Institutional histories like this one are never solely about the organization in focus. They are about inflecting broad narratives of cultural history with specificities and peculiarities, and

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<sup>3</sup> In 1990, a scholar named Pennee Bender, who had once been a member of the WMM collective in the 1970s, wrote her Master's thesis on the history of WMM from 1972—1990 at New York University. This article-length manuscript remains unpublished, and is part of WMM's historical papers. Bender's manuscript was a useful blueprint for me as I started this project. Bender is currently the Associate Director of the American Social History Project/Center for Media and Learning at the City University of New York Graduate Center.

enriching our understanding of art practices, political movements, shifts and tensions in cultural politics, and evolving trends and tendencies related to making and seeing visual media. The “institution” in an institutional history is an ever-shifting entity—a useful vehicle for examining relationships among various institutions (such as non-profit organizations and government agencies), for shedding light on the ideological, economic, and cultural climate of particular historical moments, and for shaping narratives about cultural history and the public sphere. This project is thus positioned alongside related work in Film and Media Studies that has historicized singular institutions to explore larger ideas about the intersections of art, culture, and politics.<sup>4</sup>

In short, my project frames WMM within larger narratives of cultural history, social contexts, and sets of political tensions. More specifically, my research presents a detailed and critical history of a women’s community film workshop in New York City that transformed itself over time to become a distinguished presence in a globalized visual media landscape. In doing so, my project thus brings together and contributes to several intellectual projects: (1) interdisciplinary discourses around women, gender, sexuality, and identity; (2) feminist historiography; (3) economies and histories of the arts; (4) studies of transnational media production and reception; (5) documentation of social and political movements; (6) the relation between cultural history and institutions that create, distribute, or preserve media. I situate these key issues in contexts of social and cultural history, and academic history itself, signaling important trajectories such as the establishment and growth of Film Studies and Women’s Studies programs, the increased use of visual media in education as a whole, and the rise of globalization and interdisciplinary programs for Global Studies.

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<sup>4</sup> See for example, Haidee Wasson, *Museum Movies Museum Movies: The Museum of Modern Art and the Birth of Art Cinema* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), *Perspectives on Jerome Hill & Anthology Film Archives*, Ed. Robert Haller, (New York: Anthology Film Archives, 2005), and Scott MacDonald, *Canyon Cinema: The Life and Times of an Independent Film Distributor* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008).

Critically situating WMM's particular history in larger political and cultural contexts illuminates the broader connections and reciprocities that independent film practices have with social movements, political currents, scholarly discourses, educational institutions, community engagement, and government agencies. At the same time, one way to think about a history of WMM is to consider it as a particular lens for a history of post-1960s American feminism, thereby bringing shifts in its politics, priorities, and institutionalization into focus. Just as notions of feminist activism in the U.S. have changed since the 1960s, so too have notions of WMM's role in shaping and responding to feminist media. WMM's longstanding concern with reshaping the landscape of moving image culture by infusing it with much needed women's perspectives has endured, though its manifestations have shifted over time. In 1972, the application of this goal meant providing women with access to 16mm cameras and teaching them how to use them in a small workshop in a church basement; in 2012, this goal is actualized in a number of ways through the U.S. distribution and production assistance programs, and through the international festivals and advocacy activities WMM carries out in the present.

My goal in the remainder of this brief introduction is to provide an overview of chapter summaries, which highlights important moments of transition, institutional tensions, and frameworks for understanding WMM's achievements and transformations throughout its history. The first chapter positions the formation of WMM from 1969—1974 in the context of larger feminist, alternative, and self-made media movement cultures of the 1960s, which sought to counter corporate media's homogenizing representations of gender and identity. Importantly, visual media technologies were perceived as cutting-edge technology and as the communication system of the future, and thus numerous disempowered groups sought access to it as part of larger organizing strategies for social change. Chapter one outlines this technological history



and the prevalent cultural attitudes regarding visual media to establish the climate from which WMM emerged. This chapter also articulates some of the core values expressed when WMM was founded—values like community, activism, access, and support—and suggests that these values established important precedents for WMM’s institutional identity.

Focused largely on a case study of a massive national conference WMM organized in 1975, a “Conference for Feminist Film and Video Organizations” (CFFVO), the second chapter explores how WMM’s attempts at feminist coalition building sometimes became a matter of friction around issues of race, class, sexuality, and identity. It also contextualizes WMM’s struggles in larger narratives of the women’s movement and coalition building practices. Histories of second-wave feminism tend to label the movement as predominantly white, middle-class, and fraught with racism, but the archival research I present illustrates cooperative feminist efforts that tackled issues of difference with frankness and critical attention that has been often overlooked. This chapter thus provides a fruitful example of how local or microhistories can nuance, complicate, and enrich our understanding of larger historical narratives.

The third chapter charts the origins of WMM’s film distribution program, which is one of the two programs that the organization is best known for today. This was a transition that anticipated mutually beneficial relationships with institutions that used non-commercial educational media in their programming, such as universities, libraries, media arts centers, museums, and non-profit agencies, and began to secure much-needed financial stability for the organization. The chapter centers on an in-depth case study of the content and “in-house” collective production and distribution of a women’s health documentary, titled *Healthcaring: From Our End of the Speculum* (Denise Bostrom and Jane Warrenbrand, 1976). Ultimately, this chapter argues that the film’s significance lies not only in its content, the political context of the

1970s women's health movement, or in the way in which the film resonated with critical discourses around documentary realism in the academy, but also in the way it shaped the institutional history and identity of WMM.

Chapter four explores a set of structural tensions from the late 1970s—1980s, a period in which WMM struggled to define itself in the context of a challenging climate characterized by constant financial hardship and uncertainties; inconsistent staff, membership, and programming activities; and internal tensions around art, politics, difference, and professionalization. Here, I outline numerous attempts to streamline the distribution program, and elucidate important political and economic contexts under the Reagan administration's ideological retrenchment in order to understand WMM's financial struggles in the 1980s. I then shift the discussion to the initiatives that allowed WMM to reinvent itself once again in the mid-1980s: ongoing processes of professionalization and institutionalization, and significant transnationally focused film acquisitions that built the collection and shaped WMM's institutional identity.

Chapter five operates as an exploratory conclusion, offering a descriptive approach to understanding WMM's endurance in the realm of independent and feminist media, and critically reflecting on its functions as a North American feminist distributor that features prominently on a global stage. Providing an overview of the expansion of WMM's film collection in the past two decades and concurrent widening of WMM's global influence in educational settings, this chapter critically examines the more recent history of WMM within the framework of institutional viability. In particular, it focuses on the central dimensions of WMM's current profile: a production assistance program, a distribution service, and a fluid arena of global feminist advocacy work. This exploratory chapter also examines how in the present moment, particular notions around women and transnational feminism are disseminated through visual

media, and how WMM operates as a kind of filter in the U.S.—bringing images made by women around the world to primarily North American audiences.

Sustaining feminist film cultures at WMM since 1969 has involved a series of institutional shifts in policies and priorities, strategic transformations aimed toward expansion and collection-building, and ongoing negotiations between financial practicality and political and aesthetic commitments. If we view WMM not as a static organization but rather as a set of institutional practices that shift over time, then we can better understand the extent of its cultural influence in the independent film industry, in education, and in shaping images of feminism. This dissertation explores these institutional practices and their transformations with a critical and curious eye, aiming to capture the breadth of WMM's reach in history and culture, its unique institutional endurance, and the complexity of issues it negotiates as it labors to fulfill a fundamental and multivalent vision: to support independent women filmmakers, to increase the visibility of their films, and to continue reimagining what feminist media does and looks like in an ever-changing globalized world.

## 1.0 MISTRESSING THE APPARATUS

*Power is not only a matter of coercive forces. It operates through exclusions from access to those institutions and practices through which dominance is exercised. One of these is language, by which we mean...the discursive systems through which the world we live in is represented by and to us.*<sup>1</sup>

--Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock

Beginning with the moment of its inception in 1969, Women Make Movies (henceforth WMM) has deployed particular assumptions about women and filmmaking. Specifically, in the period from 1969—1975, the founders and participating members of WMM proposed that not only could women learn to make their own films to reflect their ideas, experiences, and realities, but also that they should make such films. Informed by a swelling feminist movement in the United States, one principle subtending this proposition was that while media making was not the only vehicle through which women's consciousness-raising and empowerment could be enacted, it was an important one. Providing women with access to professional instruction in the technical processes involved in filmmaking was thus an essential component of the organization's earliest

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<sup>1</sup> Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock, *Old Mistresses: Women, Art, and Ideology* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013): 114.

mission. Certainly, this goal emerged from a particular set of social conditions, cultural tendencies, and political ideologies in which WMM germinated.

In the years preceding the formation of WMM, several forceful currents including (but not limited to) the Civil Rights movement, Vietnam War protests, student activism, United Farm Workers organizing, and a nascent Women's Liberation struggle established a revolutionary spirit that permeated the fabric of everyday social life. Concurrent with the widespread agitation in the public sphere, conversations and theorizing about the function of "new media" (i.e. television and film) in society and education were prominent in both scholarly and popular discourse. This parallel was not arbitrary. To elucidate this connection, we should take a broad view of discourses around media technologies and education practices in the 1960s.

The 1960s American film and media landscape witnessed a number of significant shifts: the continuing rise of television ownership and television news programming; the establishment of the Society for Cinema Studies (which grew out of the Society for Cinematographers), the American Film Institute, and the Public Broadcasting System; the introduction of Kodak's Super-8 "home movie" film equipment; a renewed vibrancy in American avant-garde film; and the disintegration of the studio system in Hollywood, to name but a few. A technological shift of particular interest, however, was the development of portable, lightweight 16mm filmmaking equipment with sync-sound (developed by Richard Leacock and Robert Drew in 1960) and the Sony half-inch tape Portapak video recording system (1967).<sup>2</sup> These two devices accomplished nothing less than completely transforming the production scene and the pool of people who could make moving image media and where and how they could make them.

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<sup>2</sup> See PJ O'Connell, *Robert Drew and the Development of Cinéma Vérité in America*, (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press), 1992.

Although 16mm gauge film was available starting in the 1920s, it became widely popular in the postwar years in the United States when the equipment became lighter and significantly easier to use. The relatively inexpensive format was employed for various kinds of non-theatrical film projects for many years, such as industrial, educational, military, and medical use. In the 1950s and 1960s, however, the use of 16mm expanded in the professional realm as well as among amateur, hobbyist, home movie enthusiasts, and avant-garde filmmakers in the emerging underground cinema. Maya Deren, for example, widely regarded as a leader in postwar avant-garde film, was the first major figure to work in 16mm, legitimizing its use in spheres of counter-cinema. Avant-garde film scholar David E. James claims, “By the late 1960s, the possibilities of liminal practices, variously located between the industry and hobbyists, were fully entrenched.”<sup>3</sup>

The rise of non-professional, “do it yourself,” hands-on media making and the explosion of radical filmmaking in the early 1960s roughly coincided with a major upswing in popular rhetoric around the democratizing potential of a mediated world. Likely the most famous proponent of the utopian possibilities of media, theorist Marshall McLuhan, advocated for the power of new media as effective forms of teaching and expression. His theories were discussed by numerous critics in the 1960s (and are still continually revisited in the digital age) including Susan Sontag, who praised his “grasp on the texture of contemporary reality.”<sup>4</sup> McLuhan’s immense popularity in the United States shaped the prevailing discourses about the roles that film and television should play in education and cultural life. As early as 1960 McLuhan observed that with “natural” ways of thinking about teaching practices, the book is considered

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<sup>3</sup> David E. James, *The Most Typical Avant-Garde: History and Geography of Minor Cinemas in Los Angeles* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 138.

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in Richard Kostelanetz, “Understanding McLuhan (In Part),” *New York Times*, January 29, 1967, <http://www.proquest.com>.

“the norm,” while other media—radio, film, television—are too frequently “incidental.”<sup>5</sup> He continues, “Today we’re beginning to realize that the new media aren’t just mechanical gimmicks for creating worlds of illusion, but new languages with new and unique powers of expression.”<sup>6</sup>

Recognizing that future world leaders would need fluency in diverse media forms, many teaching practices began to embrace media literacy as key to creating an intelligent and skilled citizenry. A Philadelphia-based group of educators identified as “The Communications Experience” advocated for skills in media competency as necessary in a radically changed world; they argued for “making the concept of communication central,” by “achieving a working understanding of various media forms,” which in turn would allow students to work collectively to “create, adapt, and change society.”<sup>7</sup> Developments that made visual technologies more accessible (such as Polaroid cameras or lightweight 16mm cameras) coupled with the efforts to “humanize” K-12 education fueled the integration of media literacy programs into the standard curriculum.<sup>8</sup>

Learning basic skills in photography and filmmaking was seen as an important vehicle of self-expression for young people. But perhaps more significant was a renewed perception of media’s pedagogical value in humanistic education: photographs and films could be used to transport student viewers out of their comfortable frames of reference, to expose them to realities

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<sup>5</sup> Marshall McLuhan, “Classroom Without Walls,” in *Explorations in Communications*, ed. Edmund Carpenter (Beacon Press, 1960), 1.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 2.

<sup>7</sup> The Communications Experience, “A New Kind of Writing: Basic Skills Revisited and Revised,” in *Perspectives on the Study of Film*, ed. John Stuart Katz, (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1971), 26.

<sup>8</sup> For examples of books on the movement for humanizing schools and the human potential movement, see Carl Rogers’ seminal text from 1961 in a new edition: Carl Rogers, *On Becoming a Person*, (Houghton Mifflin, 1995); George Burr Leonard, *Education and Ecstasy* (Dell, 1968); Walter Truett Anderson, *The Upstart Spring: Esalen and the American Awakening*, (Addison Wesley, 1983); Jean Houston, *Life Force: The Psycho-Historical Recovery of the Self* (Delacorte Press, 1980); Marilyn Ferguson, *The Brain Revolution: The Frontiers of Mind Research* (Taplinger Publishing, 1973).

in other parts of the country and the world, and to create, confirm or challenge particular values and beliefs. Humanities scholar William Arrowsmith, for example, praised film for its ability to educate for social change, proposing that filmmakers have the opportunity “to reshape and reinvigorate the culture.”<sup>9</sup> For Arrowsmith and other educators during this period, a vital task of education was understood as creating “a humane culture in its apparent absence or defeat,” and film was seen as powerful precisely because it was an art that could also perform the task of education.<sup>10</sup>

American universities had their own unique role in these discourses in the 1960s, witnessing various attempts to establish the cinema as a legitimate object of study—to “tether” Film Studies to “the standards associated with advanced scholarship” by rooting the study of film in the critical traditions of the humanities and creating the first graduate programs in Film Studies.<sup>11</sup> Film scholar Lucy Fischer was among the first generation of Film Studies PhDs and recently wrote a reflection on the history of academic cinema studies for the fiftieth anniversary of the Society for Cinema and Media Studies. Fischer suggests “from the present perspective, studying film back then was, in some ways, a lunatic pursuit,” acknowledging the practical difficulties involved in film research and scholarship in the 1960s and 1970s, which today are largely mitigated by digital media’s online journals, e-books, streaming video, and DVDs.<sup>12</sup> It is not a coincidence that in a decade marked by the persistent questioning of authority and power structures, the university was also marked by larger questions about disciplinary authority and the university’s role in perpetuating the marginalization of historically disadvantaged groups.

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<sup>9</sup> William Arrowsmith, “Film as Educator,” in *Perspectives on the Study of Film*, ed. John Stuart Katz, (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1971), 35.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> See the informative anthology on the history of Film Studies in academia in Lee Grieveson and Haidee Wasson, eds., *Inventing Film Studies* (Duke University Press, 2008), xv.

<sup>12</sup> Lucy Fischer, “Out of the Past,” *Cinema Journal* 49, no. 1 (2009): 129.



There was also a poignant sense that the academy (especially fields in the humanities) needed to continually restate its relevance, to “update” its texts and methodologies to remain relevant to students—and cinema worked well in this context being both “relevant” to young people and relatively “new” as a field in the university. The burgeoning field of Film Studies, in fact, became a pivotal force in the humanities; as Lee Grieveson writes, Film Studies was “peculiarly receptive to new ideas about racial and gender oppression in particular” and significantly shaped new critical approaches to gender, race, and sexuality by addressing “social oppression through cultural analysis.”<sup>13</sup>

These ideas and conversations about media and education occupied a significant place in the larger political, cultural and intellectual ferment of the 1960s in the United States. What was perceived by many as McLuhan’s essential optimism about mass media struck a chord with a lot of Americans and certainly contributed to a fairly widespread acceptance of corporate media as an informational power. Still, throughout the decade, debates persisted about whether mass media could potentially mobilize social movements or alter public consciousness.

The realm of alternative media—including activist media collectives practicing direct cinema, independent film workshops, and community and issue-based cable access programming—adopted an oppositional posture to mainstream channels of media communication with varying degrees of success.<sup>14</sup> Alternative media makers did not necessarily disbelieve McLuhan’s key assertion that media are extensions of human senses, but rather they

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<sup>13</sup> Lee Grieveson, “Discipline and Publish: The Birth of Cinematology,” *Cinema Journal* 49, no. 1 (2009): 174.

<sup>14</sup> “Direct cinema” refers to the North American form of *cinéma vérité*, an intimate mode of documentary-like recording that attempts to disregard the presence of the camera to erase the boundary between viewer and subject.

were outraged that those extensions were corporate mechanisms of alienation and social control.<sup>15</sup>

Media historian David Armstrong argues that media activists who were “intent upon reinventing America” imagined that the key to advancing social change was located in self-made film and video, a conviction that roughly paralleled the shifts in education policy.<sup>16</sup> Putting cameras “in the hands of the people” was seen as a vital step for encouraging community organizing, countering dominant media messages, and furthering social and political agendas. Therefore, while they sought to resist McLuhan’s influence in some ways, independent filmmakers also enacted some of his theories, emphasizing the conjunction of self-made media with political resistance—to the Vietnam war and draft, nuclear weapons, the relation between authoritarian universities and the military industrial complex, and capitalism in general.

To an extent, this sensibility was echoed in the realm of avant-garde filmmaking, in which the connection between new experiments in aesthetic expression and socio-political transformation asserted the possibility to “reintegrate art into the praxis of life,” in the terms of Peter Burger’s influential theory of the avant-garde.<sup>17</sup> While the work of some filmmakers like Bruce Connor could be read as political, other prominent figures like Andy Warhol and Stan Brakhage, who sought to challenge ideas about what was “appropriate” to show on screen, were both resistant to political labels.

Nonetheless, there was a palpable cultural feeling about the link between these new forms of political, self-made, radical, underground, and/or avant-garde media, and movements for

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<sup>15</sup> The notion that communications media are extensions of human faculties, and thus shape cognitive function and social organization, is foundational in McLuhan’s work, beginning with *The Gutenberg Galaxy* (University of Toronto Press, 1962).

<sup>16</sup> David Armstrong, *A Trumpet to Arms: Alternative Media in America* (Cambridge: South End Press, 1981), 28.

<sup>17</sup> See Peter Burger’s *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 22.

social change. Film scholar Paul Arthur articulates the conception of film's possibilities during this period in the 1960s:

The radical potential of film was embodied precisely in the promise of a highly visible, collective, noncommercial mastery of the apparatus. The process of witnessing, of recording, *as* a means of political representation, persons, attitudes, and events traditionally excluded from commercial channels was not simply propaedeutic but virtually commensurate with social empowerment.<sup>18</sup>

Various media workshops sprung up with the explicit aims to produce socially critical work and to teach film and video-making by putting cameras in the hands of people, and especially in the hands of marginalized groups—children and adolescents (such as Children Make Movies [1961] and Young Filmmakers Foundation [1968]), women (such as Women Make Movies [1969]), “techno-radicals” who advocated for video democracy (such as the influential Raindance Video Collective [1968]), and minorities and people of color (such as the regional branches of Newsreel [1967], known today as Third World Newsreel).

The growing pool of workshops and production collectives complemented newly established independent film organizations that distributed and/or exhibited alternative media (while also often creating it), such as New York Filmmakers Co-op (1962), Impact Films (1966), Canyon Cinema (1967), Pittsburgh Filmmakers (1971), and the Millennium Film Workshop (1967). Interestingly, although WMM would eventually transition to become more focused on film distribution rather than on production, when it was founded it was one of the few organizations explicitly dedicated to filmmaking *instruction* for women. Other feminist film

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<sup>18</sup> Paul Arthur, “Routines of Emancipation: Alternative Cinema in the Ideology and Politics of the Sixties,” in *To Free the Cinema: Jonas Mekas and the New York Underground*, ed. David E. James (Princeton University Press, 1992), 19.

organizations that emerged around the turn of the decade, like New Day Films, Impact, or the Women's Film Co-op, were organized around the rental of existing films by women filmmakers and the maintenance of feminist film libraries.<sup>19</sup>

With the rapid growth of media production workshops on the one hand, and the establishment of organizations to potentially distribute and show independent media on the other hand, an autonomous circle of film production, distribution, and exhibition developed in clear opposition to the corporate media establishment. The radical film collective Newsreel, for example, wrote: "In our hands film is not an anesthetic, a sterile, smooth-talking apparatus of control. It is a weapon to counter, to talk back to and to crack the façade of the lying media of capitalism."<sup>20</sup>

If it appears that I am somewhat conflating the 1960s innovations in film aesthetics that film historians typically refer to as the avant-garde with the newsreels and direct cinema that film historians typically refer to as activist filmmaking, it is not an accident. It speaks instead to the potent inextricability of the political imaginary of the New Left and the experimental projects taken up by numerous artists of the decade—what Arthur has called "an urgent thread" that connects "personal pleasure in art to social identification with dissident movements."<sup>21</sup> To the extent that a major architect of the American avant-garde, Jonas Mekas, saw "no difference between avant-garde film and avant-garde newsreel," the political dimension of avant-garde film's commitment to agitating the boundaries of the status quo should not be underestimated.<sup>22</sup> For Mekas, the purpose of a "real" newsreel, which could "help man to get out of where he is,

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<sup>19</sup> See Cynthia Ellen Harrison, *Women's Movement Media: A Source Guide* (Bowker, 1975).

<sup>20</sup> Newsreel Collective, "Newsreel," in *Perspectives on the Study of Film*, ed. John Stuart Katz, (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1971), 235.

<sup>21</sup> Paul Arthur, *A Line of Sight: American Avant-garde Film Since 1965* (University of Minnesota Press, 2005), xii.

<sup>22</sup> Quoted in Michael Renov, *The Subject of Documentary* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota Press, 2004), 13.

must be an avant-garde newsreel, must be in the avant-garde of humanity, must contain and be guided by the highest and most advanced dreams of man.”<sup>23</sup> In this sense, certain 1960s filmmakers harken back to the theories of Dziga Vertov, which is why Jean-Luc Godard and Jean-Pierre Gorin named their French leftist collective “Groupe Dziga Vertov.”

Another renowned film innovator from the 1960s, Stan Brakhage, was uncomfortable with naming his contemporaries’ original approaches to filmmaking with particular labels. In a discussion of the early years of the Millennium Film Workshop (of which Brakhage was an initial supporter), Ruth Galm points to Brakhage’s refusal to label the kinds of film practices and communities he was involved in: “For Brakhage, ‘Underground’ film conjured up images of a Victor Hugo character traipsing through the sewers of Paris; ‘experimental’ sounded like people were just puttering around; and ‘avant-garde’ sounded too pretentious and French.”<sup>24</sup> Nonetheless, what has been historicized as 1960s avant-garde cultural practices in the United States (including work by Brakhage, Carolee Schneeman, Ken Jacobs, Hollis Frampton, Kenneth Anger, and Yvonne Rainer) still occupies substantial terrain in cultural history.

Cultural practices and objects have been recognized as sites of political struggle since early 20<sup>th</sup>-century Marxist cultural theory, and late stage capitalism ushered in extensions of this tenet. Since the 1960s were marked by the “enlargement” of capitalism on a global scale, according to Frederic Jameson, the flourishing countercultural currents such as avant-garde art, feminism, and activist media, “offer[ed] a realm of freedom and voluntarist possibility” enabled by late capitalism’s “immense and inflationary issuing of superstructural credit; a universal abandonment of the referential gold standard; an extraordinary printing up of ever more devalued

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<sup>23</sup> Renov, 13.

<sup>24</sup> Ruth Galm, “The Millennium Film Workshop in Love,” in *Captured: a Film/Video History of the Lower East Side*, ed. Clayton Patterson (Seven Stories Press, 2005), 101.

signifiers.”<sup>25</sup> Much earlier, in 1934, the widely cited cultural theorist Walter Benjamin had argued that the content of a cultural work was not nearly as important to its political meaning as the conditions in which it was produced. In other words, cultural radicalism could be assessed by looking beyond the politics that a cultural object represents, to the politics around how that object was produced. He proposed that to incite social change, cultural producers must intervene in the processes of production. When Benjamin wrote “The Author as Producer” in 1934, he did so within a context of fascism that made the very idea of social transformation an important possibility in the spirit of political optimism. In the late 1960s in the United States, a similar sense of optimism emerged around independently made media, according a sense of possibility to these promulgators of social change in the realm of the visual.

The roots of WMM, which will be traced throughout the rest of this chapter, grew out of this climate of faith in the promise of moving image media to empower women in their communities at the micro level, and catalyze social movements at the macro level. Still, just as Brakhage refused to settle on a term for a movement he was clearly shaping, the early history of WMM does not settle neatly within any single branch of art practices from the late 1960s: the organization was not exclusively consonant with documentary or direct cinema practices, video activism, the different registers of the avant-garde, conventional narratives, feminist performance art, or community video. Rather, WMM borrowed from, responded to, and recombined various contemporary movements, forming amidst several tensions and tendencies that pulsed through social, cultural, and political life in the late 1960s.

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<sup>25</sup> Frederic Jameson, “Periodizing the 60s,” *Social Text* 9-10 (1984): 208.

## 1.1 WMM PREHISTORY

The widespread optimism about independent media, discussed above, resulted in the creation of community-based film education and filmmaking groups, which grew steadily in the United States in the 1960s through the 1970s. One important reason these groups proliferated was that although the technology had become more accessible (such as 8mm and 16mm filmmaking), it could still be rather costly to purchase cameras and film, process the film at a lab, and purchase or rent out editing equipment. Non-profit media education organizations could use grant funding to purchase their own equipment, and then provide instruction and access for numerous classes and groups. One organization with a particularly interesting lineage is the Young Filmmakers Foundation, co-founded in 1968 by an art and theater teacher named Rodger Larson and filmmaker-educators Jaime Barrios and Lynne Hofer. In 1966 film producer Paul Heller encouraged a group of inner-city adolescent boys to learn to use second-hand 16mm film equipment and their enthusiasm required the assistance of a professional instructor. Through the federally funded Neighborhood Youth Corps at the University Settlement House on the Lower East Side of Manhattan, Larson came in to develop a Film Club for the neighborhood's teenagers.<sup>26</sup> He had been teaching and mentoring low-income adolescents since 1964, and taught 16mm filmmaking to the Film Club with an old Bolex camera, a Moviescope film editor, and a set of film rewinds.<sup>27</sup> The initial Film Club, which was composed of primarily Latino youth from the settlement neighborhood, started giving its filmmaking lessons out of the kitchen

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<sup>26</sup> Rodger Larson, "Young Filmmakers," in *Captured*, 5.

<sup>27</sup> Jon Gartenberg, "Young Filmmakers Rediscovered 1964—1974," *Tribeca Film Festival Program Notes*, [http://www.tribecafilm.com/filmguide/archive/Young\\_Filmmakers\\_Rediscovered\\_1964-1974.html](http://www.tribecafilm.com/filmguide/archive/Young_Filmmakers_Rediscovered_1964-1974.html)

pantry in the settlement house on Eldridge Street.<sup>28</sup> Similar film workshops for young people had sprung up in nearby settlement communities, such as ones started in 1961 and 1963 by DeeDee Halleck at the Lillian Wald Settlement and the Henry Street Settlement, and were popular extra-curricular opportunities for local adolescents.<sup>29</sup>

In 1967, Larson received funding from the New York State Council on the Arts (NYSCA) and the City's Parks Recreation and Cultural Affairs Administration to pioneer a "Moviebus" program with his students. The Moviebus enabled Larson and the Film Club students to travel all over New York City's five boroughs and screen their productions from the top of their own Volkswagen microbus, projecting the films in parks and on side streets.<sup>30</sup>

By 1968, the Film Club received more funds from NYSCA to expand its workshops and set up a full time production space at a storefront on Rivington Street, and Larson officially incorporated the Young Filmmakers Foundation with Barrios and Hofer.<sup>31</sup> In an article from 1969, Hofer described the exhibition of the adolescents' films around New York City:

The projector was elevated through the sliding rooftop of the Volkswagen and music was played, catching the attention of passers-by. As soon as it became dark, the films began. At windows and on sidewalks, playgrounds and benches the audiences appeared. Most young viewers showed surprise pleasure that the films were so relevant to their own age and situation. The reaction that especially excited us was the desire expressed by many teenagers to tell their own film stories set in their own neighborhoods. Since the first summer of the Moviebus

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<sup>28</sup> Lynne Hofer, "Young Film Makers" in *Film Library Quarterly* 2.2 (Spring 1969): 5-7.

<sup>29</sup> DeeDee Halleck, *Hand-held Visions: the Impossible Possibilities of Community Media* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002), 83.

<sup>30</sup> In a way, this practice parallels a model of mobile screenings in the USSR in the 1910s and 1920s, in which buses and trucks traveled around the country to bring the medium of film to diverse populations.

<sup>31</sup> Hofer, 5.



several film workshops have come into existence. Among them the Studio Museum in Harlem, the Henry Street Movie club, and the Brownsville Community Council Film Workshop.<sup>32</sup>

The Young Filmmakers Foundation was initially aimed at lower income and at risk Latino youth from Manhattan's Lower East Side to help them create films that reflected their own stories and the everyday experiences in their neighborhoods, which were largely absent in the media they saw regularly. The co-founders involved other filmmakers and activists to teach film workshops to adolescents with the intention of nurturing self-esteem through, in Hofer's words, "encouraging self-expression by the teenage filmmaker."<sup>33</sup>

The prolific, veteran film and theater critic Stanley Kauffmann wrote in 1968, "the film form as such seems particularly apt for the treatment of many pressing questions of our day," and the emotional and spiritual experience of watching a film joins moviegoers in a "much larger empathetic community than has been immediately possible before in history."<sup>34</sup> According to Kauffman, film's relative youth and "freshness" compared to other art forms was part of why it was so attractive to young people; they could establish a strong proprietary feeling about "the potentials of the form" and feel that "the film belongs to them."<sup>35</sup> This sense of "freshness" also resonated at the university level, as academic Film Studies continued to grow in popularity.

Another substantial grant in 1970 allowed the Young Filmmakers Foundation to stabilize and expand its workshops and programs citywide, but the organization stayed true to its original mission to provide media skills and resources to those who would otherwise not have access to them. Until its unfortunate closing around 2007, the Young Filmmakers Foundation (renamed

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid, 5-7.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid, 7.

<sup>34</sup> Stanley Kauffmann, in Katz, 43.

<sup>35</sup> Katz, 43.

Film/Video Arts in the 1980s) sustained scores of young film students and emerging filmmakers through its workshops, equipment resources, and fiscal sponsorship for approximately forty years.<sup>36</sup>

In 1969, two of the women who co-founded WMM, Ariel Dougherty and Sheila Paige, were both recent college graduates working in the field of youth media education, taking part in what Dougherty now sees as perhaps “the ‘first wave’ of the youth media movement,” which also included Larson, Barrios, and Hofer.<sup>37</sup> Dougherty and Paige’s varied teaching experiences in numerous settings played a vital role in the rapid growth and success of WMM in its early years, from 1969 through the early 1970s. Their multiple teaching jobs and work with numerous constituencies (volunteer and paid positions they continued to hold while simultaneously forming WMM), seemed to help them to become better film instructors—a fact that was important for attracting students and participants for the workshop they would eventually co-found.

After studying art and film and teaching animation to children in the Loft Film and Theater Workshop in Bronxville, New York during her senior year of college, Dougherty graduated from Sarah Lawrence College in 1969 and moved to New York City to pursue her interest in filmmaking. She found opportunities to teach filmmaking in several arenas, some voluntary and some salaried. At the John Browne High School in Flushing, Queens, she was a Resident Filmmaker for a month in 1969 and taught filmmaking to 180 students.<sup>38</sup> In 1970, she taught Super-8 to students in a summer program in the Bedford Public Schools. For the 1970-71

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<sup>36</sup> The Young Filmmakers Foundation eventually became a renowned media arts non-profit organization that was renamed Film/Video Arts in 1985. Notable alumni of Film/Video Arts include filmmakers Jim Jarmusch, Todd Haynes, Leslie Harris, Lisa Cholodenko, Mira Nair, and Michael Moore.

<sup>37</sup> Ariel Dougherty, “The Intersections of Women Centered Media: Funding and the Struggle for Our Human Rights,” *Global Media Journal* 7, no. 13 (Fall 2008).

<sup>38</sup> Ariel Dougherty Papers, 1946-1993, Untitled personal statement, ca. 1972; MC 589, folder 15.11.

school year, she taught Super-8 in an ESL class for new immigrant children at P.S. 130 in Chinatown through the Young Filmmakers Foundation, and wrote that “making movies was one means of encouraging the children’s self-confidence in learning English...the movies are lovely documents about the children’s lives.”<sup>39</sup> From 1971-72, Dougherty served as a consultant and taught 16mm to high school students and teachers through the Metropolitan Museum of Art High School Program’s “Filmmaking for Teachers,” a workshop “for teachers, paraprofessionals, and other people interested in working with children and young adults in filmmaking.”<sup>40</sup>

During the same period, Dougherty also directed 16mm and Super-8 film workshops for teenagers at the 92<sup>nd</sup> Street Young Men’s and Young Women’s Hebrew Association (YM-WHA).<sup>41</sup> Here, Dougherty implemented a sustainable teaching structure so that the film classes she initiated could expand into a permanent, on-going workshop for the diverse groups of young people who participated in arts activities at the Y. Through these varied teaching experiences, Dougherty noticed that very few women participated in the filmmaking classes, and those who did would often quit: some would drop out because male students often dominated the class or a given project, some were forbidden to attend by their parents, and some were too busy with the demands of raising children.<sup>42</sup>

Through her own teaching experiences, Paige noted similar tendencies. In 1968, she graduated from Radcliffe College and she, too, moved to New York City and began teaching film. In 1969, she volunteered with the Young Filmmakers Foundation where she taught Super-8 to young Puerto Rican children, and soon became a salaried staff member, training others to

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<sup>39</sup> Ariel Dougherty Papers, 1946-1993, “The Directors of Women Make Movies,” ca. 1974, and Untitled personal statement, ca. 1972; MC 589, folders 12.9 and 15.11.

<sup>40</sup> Ariel Dougherty Papers, 1946-1993, “The Directors of Women Make Movies,” ca. 1974; MC 589, folder 12.9.

<sup>41</sup> Today, this New York City institution is better known as simply the 92<sup>nd</sup> Street Y and continues to serve as a significant community and cultural hub.

<sup>42</sup> Jeanne Betancourt, *Women in Focus* (Dayton: Pflaum Pub., 1974), 129.

take over her position.<sup>43</sup> In 1971 she designed and directed an affiliated video program for Puerto Rican teenagers. At the same time, she was involved with video classes and teacher training through the Clinton Junior High School Video Project.<sup>44</sup> Paige noticed that most of her students were young boys and recruited the first girls to participate in the film workshops. In a 1973 statement about her teaching experiences, Paige admitted, “I realized that it’s a lot easier for boys to make movies than girls. They’re less intimidated by machines and technology.”<sup>45</sup>

By 1969, Dougherty had become romantically involved with Jaime Barrios (one of the Young Filmmakers Foundation co-founders) and they began living together. Through this relationship, Dougherty met Paige, who had been working with Barrios through Young Filmmakers, and the two women began discussing the lack of women in their film classes and the poor representation of women’s real lives in the media. Both women were also involved with New York City-wide Women’s Liberation Meetings where this discussion was prominent. Through these meetings, Dougherty and Paige met Dolores Bargowski, a feminist organizer who had recently moved to New York City from Detroit, where she had been involved with Detroit Women’s Liberation and began the first college chapter of the National Organization of Women (NOW).<sup>46</sup> Near the end of 1969, the three women worked together to plan a film about women that they would direct, an undertaking that could be seen as the first project of WMM. That year marked the unofficial formation of WMM as a production collective, whose central goals were creating films “by, for and about women” and to develop “the creative potential of women.”<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid, 155.

<sup>44</sup> Ariel Dougherty Papers, 1946-1993, “The Directors of Women Make Movies,” ca. 1974; MC 589, folder 12.9.

<sup>45</sup> Gena Corea, “Frankly Feminist: Women Make Movies II” (paste-up of weekly column), *The New Republic Feature Syndicate* 29 (Washington, D.C.), November 16, 1973, Women Make Movies Papers.

<sup>46</sup> Barbara J. Love, *Feminists Who Changed America, 1963-1975* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2006), 27.

<sup>47</sup> Archival document, ca. 1972, Women Make Movies Papers.

To produce their first film, Bargowski, Dougherty, and Paige began writing to friends, family members, and colleagues to request financial investments. The film was to be called *Mother America* (1969), a 16mm color film with sound that explored the dynamics of three mother and daughter relationships and whose production budget they estimated at \$2,145.<sup>48</sup> In a letter to a woman identified only as “Susan,” Dougherty described the women’s motivation to make the film:

A group of us in New York Women’s Liberation have formed a movie collective. We feel it is important that women make films, and particularly about subjects which are close to us as women. Many movies on women and subjects related to women’s lives have not been made because the film industry is dominated by men and the ideas which are closest to them.

Our collective has spent some time discussing various kinds of women’s films which we would like to make. We have decided for our first movie to film a subject that is very broad and therefore reach as many people as possible. For this we have chosen the subject of mothers and daughters. We are planning in a 30 minute film to capture some of the dynamics of that relationship by showing three separate sets of mothers and daughters.<sup>49</sup>

The eventual investors in the film included some friends and family members, and colleagues such as Dr. Charles DeCarlo, then President of Sarah Lawrence College from which Dougherty had graduated in 1969.

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<sup>48</sup> Ariel Dougherty Papers, 1946-1993, “Budget,” ca. 1969; MC 589, folder 12.1.

<sup>49</sup> Ariel Dougherty Papers, 1946-1993, “Letter to Susan,” November 3, 1969; MC 589, folder 12.1.

Although a handful of rentals of *Mother America* returned to the women much less money than it eventually cost them to make the film, they lost none of their enthusiasm for the project of making women's films and realized they had begun an important endeavor.<sup>50</sup> In September 1970, Bargowski, Dougherty, and Paige decided to officialize their collective filmmaking through a New York State Business Certificate for Partners that legally affirmed them "as members of a partnership under the name or designation of Women Make Movies."<sup>51</sup> They also opened a joint bank account with New York Chemical Bank, aiming to raise money to teach other women filmmaking skills and to proceed with their numerous ideas for more films. Some of the ideas that they brainstormed for future works included films on welfare mothers; abortion; "women of the space age," which would document the lives of the Cape Kennedy technicians' wives; and a series of interviews with women in various professions, ambitiously listing figures like Susan Sontag, Simon de Beauvoir, Grace Paley, Agnes Varda, writer Eva Kollisch, and visual artist Lee Lazano, among other women they knew from the community.<sup>52</sup>

Although Bargowski, Dougherty, and Paige clearly collaborated as a trio from 1969-70, and the three names appeared prominently on their business certificate and in documents related to their film projects, Bargowski left the WMM collective after making *Mother America*. Her central project appears to have moved from filmmaking to feminist writing, organizing, and theorizing as a form of activism. She became more involved with The Feminists and Radicalesbians in New York City, and, in 1971, distributed a pamphlet called "Notes Toward a Women's Analysis of Class: A Paper" and moved to Washington D.C. to be part of a developing

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<sup>50</sup> *Mother America* ended up costing \$3300, and was rented a few times to film organizations in New York City, such as the Metropolitan Museum of Art High School Programs where Dougherty had taught, for \$30 per screening. This is documented with invoices in the Ariel Dougherty Papers, 1946-1993, "Invoice," ca. 1971; MC 589, folder 12.3.

<sup>51</sup> Ariel Dougherty Papers, 1946-1993, "Business Certificate for Partners," September 4, 1970; MC 589, folder 12.3.

<sup>52</sup> Ariel Dougherty Papers, 1946-1993, "Ideas for Women Films," ca. 1970; MC 589, folder 12.1.

Lesbian Feminist Collective.<sup>53</sup> Bargowski was also part of the initial organizing group for *Quest: A Quarterly Journal of Feminist Analysis* (published 1974—1984), which sought to “articulate a feminist theory out of the daily lives of women and the work of the movement,” and whose members believed that analyzing these concrete experiences in the movement was crucial to “advancing feminist theory and building strategies for change.”<sup>54</sup> Even after Bargowski left New York, she kept in contact with WMM and in 1975 invited Dougherty to contribute to a special issue of *Quest* on “Organizations and Strategies.”<sup>55</sup> Interestingly, despite Bargowski’s presence and involvement in the formative years of WMM (1969—1970), only Dougherty and Paige are named as the WMM co-founders in virtually all of the succeeding papers and documentation of the history of the organization, and it is not clear how that decision was made.

In 1970, Dougherty and Paige researched potential funding sources to begin a filmmaking workshop for women, mostly seeking out foundations that offered small grants to organizations. They looked to the sources that had granted money to other film organizations in New York, such as the Meyer Handelman Corporation which had given a small grant to Film Forum (an exhibition site for independent film). In a shared fundraising notebook they kept a list of possible funding sources that included numerous foundations: the Fairchild Foundation, the Logan Foundation, the New York State Foundation for the Arts, the New World Foundation, the Field Foundation, the Kresge Foundation, the New York Community Trust, the Ford Foundation, the Helena Rubenstein Foundation, and the National Endowment for the Humanities.<sup>56</sup> They applied to any companies or foundations that seemed to be even potentially interested in film and

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<sup>53</sup> Barbara J. Love, *Feminists Who Changed America, 1963-1975* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2006), 27.

<sup>54</sup> Charlotte Bunch, *Passionate Politics: Feminist Theory in Action* (New York: Macmillan, 1987), 233.

<sup>55</sup> For more on the history of *Quest*, see Charlotte Bunch, *Building Feminist Theory: Essays from Quest* (Longman, 1981).

<sup>56</sup> Ariel Dougherty Papers, 1946-1993, “Fundraising notebook,” ca. 1970; MC 589, folder 12.5.

the arts, as well as those that had supported mothers' rights, elementary education, civil rights—anything that could be connected to women's issues. Although they were frequently rejected with regret letters from numerous foundations, Dougherty and Paige worked tirelessly to fundraise for their workshop. In a journal entry from May 1970, Dougherty wrote:

Talked with Borroughs of the Whitney Fo[undation] in the morning, he said throughout that I was not a likely candidate for a grant, that they weren't interested in training people and we talked in circles and I find it hard to get myself unwound from these situations. So I called Mrs. Rausch. She said they like projects with beginnings middles and ends, uhm and I feel very frustrated, because it's all there and how do you get at it. Jaime says be delicate, whatever I do. Oh money Oh Money.<sup>57</sup>

Even a few years later when WMM had become more firmly established, Dougherty still struggled with the realities and challenges of fundraising: "I don't think I have the mentality to do all this fundraising. It's like banging heads up against a brick wall...and everybody tells you to talk to someone else, talk to someone else..."<sup>58</sup> Concurrent with the ongoing attempts to acquire funding, Dougherty and Paige sought out a neighborhood to set up their filmmaking workshop. In May 1970, Dougherty and Paige toured Chelsea in Manhattan to get a feel for the community, scout potential workshop spaces, and gauge local interest in filmmaking.

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Ariel Dougherty Papers, 1946-1993, "The State of Fundraising," June 16, 1974; MC 589, folder 12.5.



## 1.2 WMM AS PRODUCTION COLLECTIVE: THE FIRST FIVE FILMS

*I'd like to see community film workshops spring up like McDonald's around the country.*<sup>59</sup>

-- Elana Nachman, Women's Film Co-op in Northampton, MA

Dougherty and Paige set up a workshop and production space in the basement of the Rectory at St. Columba's Catholic Church on West 25<sup>th</sup> street in Manhattan, one that was shared by several community groups for meetings and events. The Chelsea neighborhood was selected for several reasons that were important to Dougherty and Paige: it was a racially, ethnically, and economically diverse community and it boasted good day care facilities, an important feature since they wanted to attract neighborhood women, including mothers with young children.<sup>60</sup> From 1969—1971, WMM trained fifteen women in filmmaking and produced five short films including *Mother America* and *Testing, Testing, How Do You Do?* (1969), a documentary about the 1969 Miss American pageant and its accompanying protests; *The Women's Happy Time Commune* (1970), a feminist Western with an all-female cast and crew; and *Three Women* (1971), which explores “the love-hate feelings” that can develop in women's relationships.

The fifth film produced collectively was *The Trials of Alice Crimmins* (1971) and became important for establishing the posture of WMM towards contemporary politics and women's issues. The short film presented a dramatic reenactment of the 1968 and 1971 murder trials of Alice Crimmins, a divorced mother in Queens, New York whose two children were found murdered in a parking lot one summer night in 1965 and whose sensationalized case was notorious in the late 1960s. Although there was no concrete evidence to link her to the murders,

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<sup>59</sup> Pamphlet, ca. 1974, Women Make Movies Papers.

<sup>60</sup> “A winter night, Chelsea, Manhattan, 1973,” ca. December 1973, Women Make Movies Papers.

Crimmins nonetheless became the main suspect and was essentially accorded no presumption of innocence.

For several years, the (mostly male) press reported obsessively on descriptions of Crimmins' physical attractiveness ("shapely," "comely," "curvy," "flame-haired," etc.), her 6-month stint as a cocktail waitress (despite her years of experience as a successful executive secretary), and her sexual relations with several different men, rather than on her status as a courageous, unashamed, single, and sexual woman.<sup>61</sup> The press also used Crimmins' unapologetic demeanor in court to sensationalize its media campaign and its portrayal of her as a cold "bitch"—a characterization that was initiated by the head detective on the case, Gerard Piering, on the day the children's bodies were found. The press dwelled on negative personal attributes that were then similarly communicated by sexist detectives and police officers (beginning with Piering). Crimmins' independence and sexuality were thus used pejoratively in the public sphere to portray her as a femme fatale with the capacity to kill; consequently, these assumptions distorted the years of investigations, appeals, and narratives about Crimmins that followed. Although in court there was never any incontrovertible proof to connect Crimmins to the murders, she was sentenced to life imprisonment.

The only group that offered their support to Crimmins was the New York Radical Feminists, but her attorneys rejected them. In her recounting of the circumstances around Crimmins' trials, journalist and activist Ann Jones asserts, "Crimmins was already under attack precisely because she was under no man's control or protection...the last thing the Crimmins defense attorneys wanted was to have her identified with equally subversive feminists, although paradoxically the anxiety that provoked the war on Alice Crimmins was undoubtedly riled by the

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<sup>61</sup> See chapter 5, "Let That Be a Lesson," in Ann Jones, *Women Who Kill* (Beacon Press, 1996).

renewed women's movement."<sup>62</sup> Kenneth Gross, a reporter who followed the case for many years and published a book about it years later, wrote, "The Alice Crimmins case...was perceived as frightening because the women's movement was just coming into existence when the case broke, and the implications—a housewife grown rebellious and out of control—terrified those who felt a stake in maintaining the status quo."<sup>63</sup> That WMM responded to the Crimmins case and what was perceived by some to be a media indictment of a particular kind of women's lifestyle signals a commitment to concrete, feminist, concerns of the moment, rather than abstract notions of women's issues.

The film *The Trials of Alice Crimmins* was made the year in which Crimmins and her attorneys appealed the initial conviction. To make a film about the case at that specific moment, therefore, was a meaningful intervention into a relevant and highly politicized discourse in which the stakes involved nothing less than the very way women's "appropriate" role in society and in the family was imagined and propagated through media. Although the archival papers from this period do not reveal much about the production circumstances, content, or reception of the film, there are a few noteworthy details about how *The Trials of Alice Crimmins* was made and screened for audiences. First, in keeping with an original goal of the organization to work towards collaborative projects, seven women produced the film collectively, only one of whom is identified in records related to the film (Marian Hunter was named as the camerawoman). Second, in materials that mention the film, such as press releases or news articles about WMM in the early 1970s, the filmmakers expressly stated that they felt that Alice Crimmins was convicted "for her lifestyle."<sup>64</sup> Third, the film was set up to be exhibited in a celebratory manner, with the

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<sup>62</sup> Ann Jones, *Women Who Kill* (Beacon Press, 1996), 278.

<sup>63</sup> Gross, qtd. in Jones, 279.

<sup>64</sup> Press Release, January 18, 1973, Women Make Movies Papers.

fliers made to look like party invitations. An “invitation” to a screening in their space at the church stated: “A party in honor of Alice Crimmins; 9:00 pm Friday November 12, 1971; 9:45 screening: *The Trials of Alice Crimmins*; Bring some eating substance.”<sup>65</sup>

Finally, the film was screened for the public on the streets of Queens and Brooklyn, New York—the epicenter of Alice Crimmins’ highly publicized story. These screenings are discussed in the WMM papers and are worth quoting at length:

[The filmmakers] shared an awareness that Alice Crimmins was victimized and sensationalized by the press. Hundreds of people saw the movie in Brooklyn and Queens who otherwise never would have seen a movie with a fresh point of view toward Alice Crimmins, a movie which questions the circus-like circumstances of her trials and the attitudes toward her lifestyle displayed in the courtroom reportage. Neighbors who never before had spoken to each other gathered between movie screenings to argue the points of Alice Crimmins’ trials. *People were not only reacting to a different look at Alice Crimmins, however, they were also reacting to a different kind of encounter with a movie and to their first contact with women making movies for other women.* Women were running the projector, attaching cables, screening the movie. The women filmmakers were available to talk with people about how the movie was made.<sup>66</sup>

Inspired by the excitement and heated discussions around the screenings of the film out in the streets, WMM proposed a traveling exhibition program to be called “the Women’s Silver Screen Roadshow,” which would bring WMM productions around the country and project them from a touring truck equipped with movie projection and video equipment. Like the Young

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<sup>65</sup> Ariel Dougherty Papers, 1946-1993, “Invitation,” ca. November 1971; MC 589, folder 12.3.

<sup>66</sup> Proposal for Women’s Silver Screen Roadshow, March 28, 1972, Women Make Movies Papers, my emphasis.

Filmmakers Moviebus program, this was an exhibition practice reminiscent of Soviet agit-prop vehicles. Although there is no documentation of the Women's Silver Screen Roadshow coming to fruition (the proposal packet is the only evidence of the project), *The Trials of Alice Crimmins* was screened in multiple venues around New York City; it was also slated to be screened in the Museum of Modern Art's weekly film series of "provocative" films called "What's Happening?", which the museum described as a presentation of "movies examining diverse social and political issues...at times polemical or opinionated, that do not as a rule receive theatrical or television distribution."<sup>67</sup>

By 1972, WMM had screened and lectured about their first five films for more than 8,000 people.<sup>68</sup> With a \$9,000 grant from the New York State Council on the Arts (NYSCA), WMM became officially incorporated as a non-profit educational organization in the summer of 1972. With this transition and the ability to take on more students, Dougherty and Paige intentionally generated a second name for their film workshop—"the Chelsea Picture Station"—to more firmly align the organization with the community in which it was now situated and with the local women it hoped to appeal to and serve.<sup>69</sup>

### 1.3 THE CHELSEA PICTURE STATION

Although the Chelsea Picture Station and Women Make Movies were essentially synonymous and referred to the same group of women and the same central project, the Chelsea Picture

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<sup>67</sup> "What's Happening?" Press Release Records no. 83, The Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) Press Release Archives, Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY.

<sup>68</sup> Archival document, ca. 1972, Women Make Movies Papers.

<sup>69</sup> Both the Chelsea Picture Station and Women Make Movies names were used until 1975, when Women Make Movies became the sole identifier.

Station name possessed a slightly different meaning since it automatically signified a specific community. The hope was that the name the Chelsea Picture Station would seem less intimidating to local residents who might want to learn filmmaking and participate in other related media activities. Refining their mission to suit its local community, Dougherty and Paige tried to market the Chelsea Picture Station workshops to the racially and ethnically diverse group of local women in its new working-class neighborhood in Chelsea. Dougherty and Paige wanted to pass on their filmmaking skills to Chelsea residents interested in taking up film “as an aesthetic approach to community problems,” as one local news article articulated it.<sup>70</sup> The Chelsea Picture Station name remained in place until the beginning of 1975, when the physical space of the workshop relocated and the organization began to garner more attention on a national and international scale.

After its official incorporation in 1972, the activities and projects of WMM through the mid-1970s seemed to center around four major priorities, which are, of course, all interconnected: instruction (teaching filmmaking to community women), production (frequently collaborative), exhibition (screenings of films in local and city-wide venues), and networking (with various organizations committed to film, women’s issues, and alternative media). The remainder of this chapter discusses the kinds of projects the Chelsea Picture Station/WMM took up in the years immediately following its incorporation, and how these projects set certain precedents for its institutional identity, its political engagement, and its position in a larger sphere of media practices.

I begin with filmmaking instruction since this is at the core of WMM’s mission from approximately 1969—1974. In their first year at St. Columba’s, the Chelsea Picture Station

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<sup>70</sup> Anne Mancuse, “Chelsea Residents Make Movies,” *Observation Post* 54 no. 5 (New York, NY), December 19, 1973.

instructors (only Dougherty and Paige at first) taught filmmaking to approximately fifty women from the community; by November 1973, these students completed eight films and twenty videos with more projects in the works.<sup>71</sup>

The Chelsea Picture Station offered small introductory workshops that covered the essentials of 16mm filmmaking and video production, and advertised the classes around the neighborhood. Dougherty and Paige placed fliers in supermarkets, laundromats, beauty parlors, and community centers, and then attracted students by word of mouth. In a draft of a document outlining the activities of WMM, Dougherty describes the influx of students: “A typist...a laundress from around the corner, a community youth worker, a mother of school age children, a retired public relationist [*sic*], high school students have come into WMM’s workshop attracted by the magic of making a movie and hungry to say something about their own experiences.”<sup>72</sup>

During the first year in the church basement, there seemed to be consistent, significant awareness about communicating a sense of the diversity among the Chelsea Picture Station’s new filmmaking students and the “real life” content of their films. A press release from January 1973, for example, begins by stating: “New 16mm Movies: The new film-makers are secretaries and mothers, bookkeepers and housewives, teenage, adult, and elderly women.”<sup>73</sup> The introductory paragraph continues:

Their movies, some independently produced, some “first” movies made in educational film workshops, represent points of view completely fresh to

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<sup>71</sup> Gena Corea, “Frankly Feminist: Women Make Movies II” (paste-up of weekly column), *The New Republic Feature Syndicate* 29 (Washington, D.C.), November 16, 1973, Women Make Movies Papers.

<sup>72</sup> Ariel Dougherty Papers, 1946-1993, Untitled document by Ariel Dougherty, September 23, 1974 or 1975 (discrepancy in document headings); MC 589, folder 12.5.

<sup>73</sup> “Press Release,” January 18, 1973, Women Make Movies Papers.

commercial television and movie audiences. Personal, true to everyday life, these movies are acutely perceptive portraits of a wide spectrum of today's women.<sup>74</sup>

In a program for a screening at the local branch of the New York Public Library, the text accompanying the list of film titles demonstrates this tendency as well:

These movies were made by women, young and old, who are working at Chelsea Picture Station, the community film and video workshop administered by Women Make Movies, Inc...The movies on this program reflect the real lives of housewives and welfare mothers, secretaries, and bookkeepers who live in an urban community.<sup>75</sup>

I would like to note that the Chelsea Picture Station's particular type of women's filmmaking, which intended to document or present "real women's" lives and experiences, proliferated in other contexts during the late 1960s and early 1970s. Laura Mulvey, for example, has characterized women's filmmaking during this period as "a mixture of consciousness-raising and propaganda."<sup>76</sup> It is also important to recall, however, that this was one of two main types of women's film practices that developed roughly simultaneously at this historical juncture: the second involved innovations in cinematic representation and form, which became recognized as a thriving feminist core of American avant-garde cinema. Another feminist film scholar, Teresa de Lauretis, has discussed the tendency to separate the two branches of women's film production at this moment:

The accounts of feminist film culture produced in the mid- to late seventies tended to emphasize a dichotomy between two concerns of the women's

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> "Your Neighbors Make Movies" Screening Program, April 25, 1973, Women Make Movies Papers.

<sup>76</sup> Laura Mulvey, "Film, Feminism, and the Avant-Garde," in *Visual and Other Pleasures*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 117.



movement and two types of film work that seemed to be at odds with each other: one called for immediate documentation for purposes of political activism, consciousness-raising, self-expression, or the search for “positive images” of woman; the other insisted on rigorous formal work on the medium—or, better, the cinematic apparatus, understood as a social technology—in order to analyze and disengage the ideological codes embedded in representation.<sup>77</sup>

What is interesting about this “dichotomy” in terms of WMM’s self-presentation is that while the filmmaking practices of the earliest years of the organization exemplify the former category of realist “consciousness-raising” practices, it is the latter category of avant-garde innovations that became central to WMM’s institutional identity several years later. The organization would eventually evolve to incorporate women pioneers in avant-garde film in its distribution catalogs, and today is still recognized as one of the few resources for feminist avant-garde films made by “canonical” figures like Maya Deren and Barbara Hammer and for rarely seen experimental films by Ulrike Ottinger, Sally Potter, and Tracey Moffatt.

The early materials distributed by WMM emphasized the diversity of the workshop participants and new filmmakers, but the publicity materials for the Chelsea Picture Station also consistently focused on a notion of “the local”: from the intentional dual naming of the organization (Women Make Movies and the Chelsea Picture Station) to its film projects and outreach efforts. Issues of local control circulated widely at the time: a racially polarizing New York City teacher strike in 1968, for example, advocated for more community control of education. The descriptors “neighborhood media center” and “community film and video

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<sup>77</sup> Teresa de Lauretis, “Rethinking Women’s Cinema: Aesthetics and Feminist Theory,” in *Multiple Voices in Feminist Film Criticism*, ed. Diane Carson, Linda Dittmar, and Janice R. Welsch (University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 141.

workshop” appear prominently in the WMM’s papers dating from 1972—1975, and notably the Chelsea Picture Station offered residents of the Chelsea community free instruction, while “outsiders” who wanted to participate in the workshops paid a sliding scale fee based on income.<sup>78</sup>

An early flier describes Chelsea Picture Station as a workshop that “has been teaching neighborhood people how to make videotapes and 16mm films and radio programs.”<sup>79</sup> The flier asks the reader, “Why?” and answers, “Because sharing experience is important, and these are effective ways to do it. The Picture Station is administered by Women Make Movies, Inc. and the feminist focus is more or less evident in their films. The N.Y. State Council on the Arts provides most of the funds.”<sup>80</sup> The same flier then asks, “So What?” and its response is a fairly explicit endorsement of a core value of community organizing with film: “So, for one thing, you could make a film at Chelsea Picture Station. Free. Amazing, but true. For another, if we’re serious about knowing our neighborhood this is a good way into some probably unfamiliar aspects of it.”<sup>81</sup>

After learning how to thread a spring-wind 16mm Bolex camera, read a light meter, and adjust the proper lens to the correct exposure and focus, the Chelsea Picture Station students would go out into the neighborhood by themselves to shoot a practice roll. When these technical basics were mastered, students would begin writing a script and developing a plan to produce their own short film, as Dougherty recounts:

Over a three and half year period dozens of women have spent four, six, eight hours a week for anywhere from four to twelve months script writing, directing,

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<sup>78</sup> Clipping, ca. 1973, Women Make Movies Papers.

<sup>79</sup> “Films from the Chelsea Picture Station,” ca. 1973, Women Make Movies Papers.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

shooting, editing, preparing a soundtrack, and editing some more until finally completing their “first film.” *The work is difficult, but not so difficult that one can’t learn to master the technical skills which have traditionally been considered men’s domain (and which we know we can mistress with great skill).*<sup>82</sup>

Dougherty and Paige were the primary teachers during the first few years, until Anne Sandys joined the staff in June 1974 and began helping them teach classes. These women spent most of their time working with students individually or in groups, talking to them about their projects. Dougherty describes the process: “We spent a great deal of energy talking [with the students about]... how a script progressed, yes, that’s a good idea, but I don’t see this transition...describe how the action of what the woman does will make that point clear to the audience.”<sup>83</sup>

Practically speaking, the workshop was open four days per week with some morning, afternoon, evening, and weekend, hours, to accommodate mothers with school age children and working women who were only available in the evenings. Dougherty explains the logistics of operating the workshop in this way: “[the] open structure allowed each woman to set her own hours which fit the needs of her individual project. We actively encouraged two visits or a long six-hour stretch weekly, feeling/knowing that without regular contact with the creative process one’s interest wanes.”<sup>84</sup> While filmmaking and editing instruction were the main activities going on during the workshop’s open hours, the time the women spent together in the church basement or out in the streets shooting a film seemed to become important for other reasons.

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<sup>82</sup> Ariel Dougherty Papers, 1946-1993, Untitled document by Ariel Dougherty, September 23, 1974 or 1975 (discrepancy in document headings); MC 589, folder 12.5; my emphasis.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

One workshop participant wrote an especially vivid description of the workshop climate called “A Winter Night, Chelsea, Manhattan” in 1973 (unfortunately the author did not identify herself). She wrote that the Chelsea Picture Station was “more than just a place to learn film and video” and admitted she would frequently stop by on days she was not scheduled to shoot, edit or record, “just to see what’s happening, and to share the day’s experience with Sheila, Ariel, and whoever is there working...this makes for real supportive contact with women on a daily basis.”<sup>85</sup> She also detailed the atmosphere in the church basement, and the variety of interactions the women had with one another while there:

Chelsea Picture Station is never the same two days running...Many visitors come by to see our movies and see the workshop in action. There is a constant flow of people and activities. Instruction is highly individualized, and assistance is everywhere. Sheila and Ariel bear the main load...but all participants help each other and give valuable feedback on each other’s work. Often there is a need to talk about something personal, about something that’s bugging you at work, or about the hassle of just walking down the street.<sup>86</sup>

The physical space of the Chelsea Picture Station functioned, then, not just as a place for women to share techniques of filmmaking, but also as a place to share techniques of survival in a culture saturated with sexism in everyday experiences.

Dougherty also recognized the importance of this dimension of the workshop and explained that while “the teaching was extremely personalized focusing on the movie and how to move it through the various stages,” it was also important to account for “people’s moods, ups

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<sup>85</sup> “A Winter Night, Chelsea, Manhattan, 1973,” ca. December 1973, Women Make Movies Papers.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

and downs, what happened at work, what happened on the street getting to the workshop.”<sup>87</sup> While this particular mode of communicating and connecting to other women was very meaningful to the participants, it was still a correlative to the “real work and purposeful activity” that went into producing films about the women’s perspectives, experiences, and challenges.<sup>88</sup> In other words, “being together as women” was “not just talk,” and the Chelsea Picture Station students worked together in the context of a meaningful, even vital project—transposing the hassle of walking down the street (subjected to catcalls and general street harassment), for example, into a visual form to share and talk about with others.<sup>89</sup>

It is important to acknowledge that the Chelsea Picture Station workshop setup was not an attempt to simply experiment with “amateur” filmmaking. The organization’s women were not interested in realizing Roland Barthes’ conception of the amateur artist—a woman engaging in film out of love, without the “spirit of mastery,” in order to embody the “counter-bourgeois artist.”<sup>90</sup> Rather, the Chelsea Picture Station film workshops and the forms of communication around them in conversations, fliers, publicity, newsletters, and the like, bespeak a substantial effort to professionalize, to in fact master—or mistress—a form of cultural production in which women were socially and institutionally excluded. While the Chelsea Picture Station did not explicitly name itself at the time as a feminist organization (it was billed mainly as a community film and video workshop), its mission alone, to train women in an artistic and technological form that they are traditionally denied access to, constituted an important mode of feminist engagement in the context of an escalating women’s movement. In keeping with the feminist

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<sup>87</sup> Ariel Dougherty Papers, 1946-1993, Untitled document by Ariel Dougherty, September 23, 1974 or 1975 (discrepancy in document headings); MC 589, folder 12.5.

<sup>88</sup> “A Winter Night, Chelsea, Manhattan, 1973,” ca. December 1973, Women Make Movies Papers.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

<sup>90</sup> Roland Barthes, *Roland Barthes* (Macmillan, 1977), 52.

pulse in the late 1960s in the United States, this workshop contributed to the large-scale aim to uproot traditional, sexist notions about femininity and women's conventional roles in labor and society.

The organization of the Chelsea Picture Station also largely functioned in ways that are associated with feminist collectives, a form of self-organization that became prominent in the late 1960s and 1970s. Multimedia artist and educator Jesse Drew discusses what constituted a collective in the 1960s and 1970s countercultural milieu:

Collectives run the gamut from loose associations of like-minded individuals working toward a common goal, to rigid, cadre-like, single-minded organizations with a vanguardist, democratic centralism at their heart. It would be safe to say at least collectives generally seek some kind of consensus around work to be performed, be it a film production or a potato harvest. Egalitarian concerns are high on the list of priorities, whereby rank is downplayed, at least official rank, and the division of labor seeks to be nonhierarchical and rotating, so that everyone can do all.<sup>91</sup>

The Chelsea Picture Station's consistent sharing of teaching skills and material and intellectual resources, frequent collaboration, decisions by consensus, and lack of an overriding sense of authority in the midst of working toward a communal goal to train local women in film production, indicate a firm commitment, whether stated outright or not, to feminist ideals. In some ways, I think the women of the Chelsea Picture Station perhaps purposefully engaged with the feminist currents of their time under the guise of a "community workshop," as a way not to

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<sup>91</sup> Jesse Drew, "The Collective Camcorder in Art and Activism," in *Collectivism After Modernism: The Art of Social Imagination After 1945*, ed. Blake Stimson and Gregory Sholette (U of Minnesota Press, 2007), 99-100.

deter or alienate local women who might have been skeptical of participating in a feminist media center named as such.

At this particular moment in the history of women's movements, there were substantial tensions around race and class privilege within American feminism. Ellen Willis, a political essayist, cultural critic, and activist who co-founded the radical feminist group Redstockings in 1969, has written about her experiences with feminist movements in the United States. In an essay written in the early 1980s, Willis articulated these strained relations inherent in organizing large groups of women with diverse identities and experiences:

There was an unarticulated assumption that we could work out our differences solely within a feminist framework and ignore or agree to disagree on other political issues...I think that assumption was necessary, in order to create a feminist framework to begin with, but it made for a very fragile kind of solidarity—and it also excluded large groups of women. The question of why the radical feminist movement was overwhelmingly white and mostly middle class is complex, but one reason is surely that most black and working class women could not accept the abstraction of feminist issues from race and class issues, since the latter were so central to their lives.<sup>92</sup>

From the relative lack of explicit feminist rhetoric in the Chelsea Picture Station's early materials, one could interpret a kind of ambivalence about contemporary feminism. However, I would suggest instead that this peculiar absence may have been, perhaps, a strategic way to attract to the workshop a truly diverse pool of working class, multi-racial women from the community. Employing "community media workshop" as the main signifier rather than

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<sup>92</sup> Ellen Willis, "Radical Feminism and Feminist Radicalism," *Social Text*, no. 9/10 (Spring - Summer 1984): 95.

“feminist film workshop” (or something like that), seems to me to be an intentional gesture to establish a clear sense of open access for all the women in a racially, ethnically and economically mixed New York City neighborhood—a gesture to thwart the impression of “abstraction” to which Willis refers in her history.

By January 1973, the waiting list for a spot in the Chelsea Picture Station workshops grew long while the organization’s resources remained tightly limited. Paige sent out a letter encouraging existing participants and those on the waitlist to collaborate on cooperative productions “intended for community use,” and set up a meeting time so those interested would be able to communicate with one another.<sup>93</sup> Cooperative production was described in the letter as follows: “Together, the filmmakers would design the script on a subject of interest to all of them. Each would learn camerawork, lighting, directing, editing, sound recording, and share in the experience of making and showing the movie.”<sup>94</sup> Paige suggested possible topics for collaborative community films in the letter, including tenants threatened with eviction, local police, VD information, and special educational projects at local school IS 70.

In July 1973, the Chelsea Picture Station celebrated its one-year anniversary with “a dance party in the moonlight.” The newsletter from that same month reported that in its first year, Chelsea Picture Station grew from “a community film workshop for women, to a community film, video and radio workshop with over 50 students.”<sup>95</sup> Within this first year, the Chelsea Picture Station worked toward a range of production projects, and the newsletters seemed to serve as a central venue for reporting on the progress of these productions. Some of the earliest films by members were instructional in nature, such as Jane Warrenbrand’s *How to*

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<sup>93</sup> Sheila Paige, Letter, January 24, 1973, Women Make Movies Papers.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

<sup>95</sup> Jane Warrenbrand, “Chelsea Picture Station Newsletter #2,” July 1973, Women Make Movies Papers.



*Cut Up a Chicken* (ca. 1973) starring former filmmaker Suzanne Armstrong. This film was intended to be part of a series to help women save money in grocery shopping. Other films were documentary recordings of local events, such as an acting improvisation class that was filmed by Lorraine McConnel. Students produced several informational tapes about issues of local interest, such as one on the lives of women artists (by Mary Harrison and Warrenbrand), a second about youth problems (by Marshaline Letcher and Millie Pohlador), and a third on the area homes for the elderly (by Melinda Rheingold).

In March 1973, the Chelsea Picture Station taped the first national conference of the feminist labor organization Stewardesses for Women's Rights (SFWR). Co-founded in 1972 by Sandra Jarrell and Jan Fulsom after taking their employer Eastern Airlines to court for discriminatory regulations regarding weight and grooming, SFWR worked for four years to inform its members about sexist marketing strategies in the airline industry and to change discriminatory policies within those companies.<sup>96</sup> Their first national conference featured an address by Gloria Steinem, who had recently founded *Ms.* magazine in 1972 and supported SFWR's throughout its existence.<sup>97</sup> After taping the conference, WMM's members Judy Acuna and Warrenbrand edited the video along with two of the stewardesses from SFWR (who were unnamed in the film's documentation). This experience prompted the creation of an ongoing fundraising project, in which WMM's solicited other organizations, especially women's groups or feminist activists, that might want to have their meetings or events filmed for their own records or promotional activities.

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<sup>96</sup> *Stewardesses for Women's Rights Records*, Tamiment Library/Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, Elmer Holmes Bobst Library, New York University Libraries, New York, NY.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*

It was also recognized early on that since the Chelsea Picture Station members were women making films for the first time, most of the films expressed women's concerns or the "problems of women within the community," and they frequently illustrated "feminine pressures often felt in a male dominated society."<sup>98</sup> Paige noted that the scripts crafted by the first groups of students showed "an extraordinary concentration on fear and rape," perhaps unsurprising since it was a period of high crime in New York City.<sup>99</sup> She was also likely referring to Jean Shaw's short film *Fear* (1973), which featured a secretary who "revolts against her conditioning," becomes enraged by a male attacker and courageously triumphs in a dangerous situation.<sup>100</sup> This film was featured regularly in Chelsea Picture Station screenings in the early 1970s and Shaw was interviewed for a news article on the Chelsea Picture Station in 1974. She explains: "Women don't get a fair chance in most movies you see. But these movies we make are about women with goals. They're talking to you. You see images—big, powerful images you can connect with, instead of a chick getting ripped off by James Bond. These movies are made by women who are involved in what they are doing."<sup>101</sup> Paige also observed that films "have a lot to do with fantasies" and that many of the early Chelsea Picture Station productions seem to reflect the desire of struggling women to take control of their lives.<sup>102</sup>

While teaching the workshops at the Chelsea Picture Station, Dougherty and Paige also managed to produce their own films during the first couple of years of the organization's life. Paige's fifty-minute color film from 1970, *The Women's Happy Time Commune*, was re-edited

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<sup>98</sup> Anne Mancuse, "Chelsea Residents Make Movies," *Observation Post* 54 no. 5 (New York, NY), December 19, 1973.

<sup>99</sup> Gena Corea, "Frankly Feminist: Women Make Movies II" (paste-up of weekly column), *The New Republic Feature Syndicate* 29 (Washington, D.C.), November 16, 1973, Women Make Movies Papers.

<sup>100</sup> "Your Neighbors Make Movies" Screening Program, April 25, 1973, Women Make Movies Papers.

<sup>101</sup> Paula Bernstein, "They Change Views from a Reel-life to Real Life," *Daily News*, April 3, 1974, Women Make Movies Papers.

<sup>102</sup> Gena Corea, "Frankly Feminist: Women Make Movies II" (paste-up of weekly column), *The New Republic Feature Syndicate* 29 (Washington, D.C.), November 16, 1973, Women Make Movies Papers.

in 1972, and was described as “a feminist Western” and “an anarchic, unconventional movie in which the old West is the stomping grounds for a motley crew of young and middle-aged women who are considering banding together to form a commune.”<sup>103</sup> Dougherty made *Sweet Bananas* (30 minutes, color) in 1972, a film that presents women who “turn out not to be characters of some Hollywood creation” and “meet each other’s likes and prejudices head on.”<sup>104</sup>

Dougherty and Paige both seemed strongly invested in the vision that proficiency in the technical skills of filmmaking and the ability to converse with viewers at screenings of their films, women gained a meaningful sense of pride and self-confidence.<sup>105</sup> In a reflection Dougherty wrote around 1974, she conjoins the act of making a film with empowerment:

The magical power of filmmaking [is] projecting from ourselves and of ourselves for others... For women, taking control of this power is especially difficult; we have been so conditioned to not realize fantasies; to be fearful of technical equipment; and most importantly to not feel powerful...On the screen the image [seems] four, six, ten, twenty times larger than you and becomes a means to controlling and creating power... And as we regain more and more of our power the quality and content of our lives will undergo a tremendous transformation.<sup>106</sup>

This sentiment was strongly mirrored in the outreach material WMM’s used to publicize the workshop or network with other organizations. For example, an early brochure states, “Women Make Movies has actively recruited and encouraged neighborhood women,” whose

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<sup>103</sup> Early distribution brochure, ca. 1975, Women Make Movies Papers.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid.

<sup>106</sup> Ariel Dougherty Papers, 1946-1993, Untitled document by Ariel Dougherty, September 23, 1974 or 1975 (discrepancy in document headings); MC 589, folder 12.5.

“hopes and dreams have been hitherto undocumented.”<sup>107</sup> The film workshops were billed as “an important supportive environment where a culturally diverse range of women in their youth, middle, and old age share experiences, strengthen self-identities and create, often for the first time, a product which will be presented again and again to the public.”<sup>108</sup>

Central to the Chelsea Picture Station’s project was the empowerment that was embedded in the act of women making their own films and the concurrent empowerment of the local community. Many Chelsea residents who were not themselves making films at the Chelsea Picture Station were still involved with the films that were being produced. More than one thousand community members served as actors and extras and offered up their homes or business locations for film shoots, “themselves and their community affirmed in a manner totally unlike news coverage or commercial media,” as an early WMM’s brochure asserts.<sup>109</sup>

In materials related to film screenings, the Chelsea Picture Station described itself as “the community film and video workshop administered by Women Make Movies, Inc.”<sup>110</sup> Attempting to reach out to more neighborhood residents in its first year there, the Chelsea Picture Station assembled a program of their films called “Your Neighbors Make Movies,” which was shown at the local branch of the New York Public library in April 1973. Consistent with their attempts to market themselves as a community workshop interested in local concerns, the cover of the program featured a map of lower Manhattan, with the physical location of the workshop (i.e. the Church) indicated with an “X.” The program listed six short films and descriptions of the Chelsea Picture Station activities:

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<sup>107</sup> Ariel Dougherty Papers, 1946-1993, Brochure, ca. 1974; MC 589, folder 12.7.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid.

<sup>110</sup> “Your Neighbors Make Movies” Screening Program, April 25, 1973, Women Make Movies Papers.

At Chelsea Picture Station, a free workshop operated with support from the New York State Council on the Arts, residents of the Chelsea community are learning film and video skills and developing their own news and entertainment programs. The movies in this program reflect the real lives of housewives and welfare mothers, secretaries, and bookkeepers who live in an urban community. Women Make Movies, a non-profit, educational corporation, is working to ensure that women play an important role in developing communications within their neighborhood and in creating the future of cable public access television.<sup>111</sup>

At the screenings themselves, the films were described as representative of “a new wave of film-making based on the everyday experiences and struggles of women from a diverse and rich neighborhood of New York City.”<sup>112</sup> A flier that was produced to accompany a program of works screened at the Muhlenberg Library, for example, lists not only the titles and a one-sentence synopsis of each film, but also includes a one-sentence biography for each filmmaker, emphasizing their diversity. Consider these examples from a program in 1973:

*For Better or Worse* (7 min, b/w, 1973)

By Judith Shaw Acuna. Married, originally from Tulsa Oklahoma, she works in the personnel department at American Airlines.

Professional by day and domestic by night, a newly wed pediatrician finds herself working a double shift. Her solution?

*Domestic Tranquility* (7 min, b/w, 1973)

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<sup>111</sup> Ibid.

<sup>112</sup> “Muhlenberg Library Presents 16mm Movies made at Chelsea Picture Station,” December 6, 1973, Women Make Movies Papers.

By Harriet Kriegel, a 39-year-old housewife working toward her masters degree in theatre.

A wife and mother is haunted by her one-time ambition to be an artist.

*Just Looking* (6 min, b/w, 1973)

By Suzanne Armstrong, a retired air force pilot in her sixties, currently starring in a series of videotapes including, *How to Cut Up a Chicken*.

An older woman is seduced into an unpredictable and adventurous afternoon by a series of friendly and determined people.

*Katie Kelly* (5 min, b/w, 1973)

By Brown, Greiner, McConnell, Weiner, and Zaglen, five women ranging in age from 19 to 63—a college student, assistant librarian, editor, photographer, and grandmother.

A portrait of Katie Kelly—professional writer (author of *Garbage, It's History and Future in America*), environmentalist and active community leader.<sup>113</sup>

Presentations and screenings of Chelsea Picture Station movies were planned at New York City's Movies in the Parks summer screening program; the 400 West Block Association in Chelsea; the Muhlenberg Library, and the Jefferson Market Regional Library, branches of the New York Public Library; the Golden Ring Club, an organization of senior citizens in the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union (ILGWU) Cooperative Housing Village on the Lower East Side; the General Theological Seminary in Chelsea; the Riverside Church on the

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<sup>113</sup> Ibid.

Upper West Side; events at the Women's Collective such as a Demonstration Day; and in other venues and women's groups around New York City.<sup>114</sup>

In March 1974, the Chelsea Picture Station films *Domestic Tranquility*, *Fear, For Better or Worse*, *Just Looking*, *Katie Kelly*, and *Paranoia Blues* were shown as part of a "Reel Women" film series at the Riverside Church on the Upper West Side. The program was followed by a "Discussion of Films with Chelsea Women." Colleen Myers, who coordinated the series, describes the mission on the back of the printed program:

The image of "woman" which built the American film industry denied the reality of life for most women as well as men. Female screen stars – the stuff of our dreams – were mostly "image," rarely real women. Today, however, women filmmakers are writing, directing, filming, and distributing their own dreams and their own realities.

REEL WOMEN was conceived because we believe women filmmakers have things unique and important to show us about life. The films include some women's first attempts at using film to interpret and communicate their own experiences...Film to us is an unsurpassed medium for conveying subtleties of mood and feeling as well as powerful documentaries of human life. We hope that these films will broaden your appreciation of the variety and scope of human experience and that other women will be encouraged to explore the use of film in their own lives.<sup>115</sup>

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<sup>114</sup> Press Releases, ca. 1973, Women Make Movies Papers.

<sup>115</sup> Ariel Dougherty Papers, 1946-1993, REEL WOMEN Film Series Program, March 8, 1974; MC 589, folder 12.5.

These program notes are interesting because the remarks are consonant with some of the earliest feminist film criticism in the early 1970s, which focused on the perpetual stereotyping of women in Hollywood and “negative” images, and sought more “realistic” portrayals of women on screen.<sup>116</sup> This brand of criticism also hoped that such films would not only better reflect real women’s realities but also alter the perceptions of female viewers who would see those images.

Key to understanding the Chelsea Picture Station’s ways of thinking about the role of film in their community and community involvement is to recognize that the women sought to reshape the way that film viewing was imagined and experienced. In short, they were interested in contributing to the building movements around alternative media practices in the United States. A core value of alternative media movements at this historical juncture was to understand making and viewing independent films as part of a larger project: anti-imperialist, anti-corporate, anti-racist, feminist, or some combination of dissident activist practices.

Alternative exhibition can be defined in primarily two ways: as avant-garde film historian Scott MacDonald explains; it can refer to “the exhibition of forms of cinema not available in commercial theaters or on television,” the venue for which could be a traditional cinema or someone’s backyard, as was common in the early days of Canyon Cinema.<sup>117</sup> Alternative exhibition can also refer to the socio-cultural experience of viewing films in non-commercial or non-traditional venues, such as church basements, community centers, independent bookstores, private apartments, and outdoors on the sides of buildings or in streets and parks. Typically, participating in conversation and lively debate after the film screening is encouraged,

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<sup>116</sup> Molly Haskell’s *From Reverence to Rape: The Treatment of Women in the Movies* (1974) is one of the first and probably the most famous book of film criticism that examines the negative and stereotypical images of women on screen.

<sup>117</sup> Scott MacDonald, *Canyon Cinema: the Life and Times of an Independent Film Distributor* (University of California Press, 2008), 2.



appropriating a tradition from the French institution of the “ciné-club” in the 1920s. This form of exhibition practice manifested in the United States in various ways, from Amos Vogel’s Cinema 16 in the 1940s to the Film Society of Lincoln Center in 1969, and numerous other permutations of film societies that operated out of gallery spaces or people’s homes.<sup>118</sup>

The Chelsea Picture Station women spoke to their audiences at screenings, believing that their films, while often personal, should be springboards for discussion or action beyond a singular screening. In a statement in 1973, Paige explained, “The ways to see and use short films have to be invented, they’re unexplored. They could be shown at civic centers, at high schools, and on the sides of buildings at block parties.”<sup>119</sup> In programs for screenings, the text typically included an invitation to “stay a few minutes after the screening to discuss and share your views about the films with us.”<sup>120</sup>

Dougherty recognized the transformative power for women of making their own films and actually screening them for people:

[For the women] who have completed a film and seen it shown at the Women and Film International Festival in 1973 in Toronto; who have helped set up community screenings and talked with their neighbors about the making of their own films; who have heard that upon seeing their movies audiences in

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<sup>118</sup> For histories of exhibition practices, see: Ina Rae Hark, ed., *Exhibition: the Film Reader* (Psychology Press, 2002); Scott MacDonald, ed., *Cinema 16: Documents Toward a History of the Film Society* (Temple University Press, 2002); Gregory Albert Waller, ed., *Moviegoing in America: a Sourcebook in the History of Film Exhibition* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2002); and Barbara Wilinsky, *Sure Seaters: the Emergence of Art House Cinema* (U of Minnesota Press, 2001).

<sup>119</sup> Gena Corea, “Frankly Feminist: Women Make Movies II” (paste-up of weekly column), *The New Republic Feature Syndicate* 29 (Washington, D.C.), November 16, 1973, Women Make Movies Papers.

<sup>120</sup> Screening for the Golden Ring Club, February 6, 1974, Women Make Movies Papers.

Washington D.C. raved and burst into applause and that in Heidelberg audiences booed—those women’s lives have changed forever.<sup>121</sup>

In June 1973, Dougherty devised a mobile video cart to facilitate screenings out in the community. Like the activist and youth media groups’ local exhibition practices in the late 1960s, the Chelsea Picture Station women sought to show their films in the evenings in neighborhood locations like laundromats and street corners, an exhibition scenario that would allow busy working residents of the community to see the locally made films. The Newsreel activist film collective was notorious for these kinds of street screenings: “Newsreels must be weapons: they must confront people who are not motivated to go see them...We take the films into the street, we stop people on the street, and confront them with our films. Involve them as participants.”<sup>122</sup>

Similarly driven to show their films to people who would not otherwise see them, the Chelsea women were committed to screening their films for as many audiences as possible, and holding discussions about “how the movies were made and/or feminist issues raised through them.”<sup>123</sup> Of course, these discussions are related to (though not exactly the same as) the general consciousness-raising (or “CR”) projects of the women’s movement of this time: group conversations that aimed to link personal experiences and individual testimonies to larger political issues, analyze the roots of sexism, and then take action through further education, demonstrations, and political advocacy.

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<sup>121</sup> Ariel Dougherty Papers, 1946-1993, Untitled document by Ariel Dougherty, September 23, 1974 or 1975 (discrepancy in document headings); MC 589, folder 12.5.

<sup>122</sup> Newsreel Collective, “Newsreel,” *Perspectives on the Study of Film*, ed. John Stuart Katz, (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1971), 238.

<sup>123</sup> Chelsea Picture Station Newsletter, March 26, 1974, Women Make Movies Papers.

Audiences' reception of films is a notoriously challenging area to research and measure in Film Studies, and researching women's films from the 1960s and 1970s is no exception. Film scholar Janet Staiger, who has written widely on practices of film reception, explains an historical materialist approach to media reception and its audiences:

Contextual factors, more than textual ones, account for the experiences that spectators have watching films and television and for the uses to which those experiences are put in navigating our everyday lives. These contexts involve intertextual knowledges (including norms of how to interpret sense data from moving images and sounds), personal psychologies, and sociological dynamics. The job of a reception historian is to account for events of interpretation and affective experience.<sup>124</sup>

Although we can identify particular venues where Chelsea Picture Station films were screened (from screening programs, press releases, and the like), it is difficult to accurately describe the kinds of reactions and conversations that unfolded at those screening venues or specific "affective experiences."

One notable exception is from a screening of Chelsea Picture Station films at the First International Women's Film Festival in Washington, D.C., a two week long event in the fall of 1973 that was sponsored by the Washington Women's Center and Janus Theater. The festival featured five films from the Chelsea women, including Jean Shaw's short film *Fear* (mentioned above) about a typist who is harassed on the street, passed over for a promotion at work, and then attacked by a potential rapist in a restroom. The victim becomes enraged when the attacker pulls a gun on her, and she successfully defends herself, shoots him, and chases him down the street

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<sup>124</sup> Janet Staiger, *Perverse Spectators: the Practices of Film Reception* (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 1.

until two other women “drag him away,” as the review in the feminist journal *off our backs* described.<sup>125</sup> Three women who reported on the festival for the journal described the screening of this film: “The women in the audience applauded and cried out with joy. The movie is the most positive, strength creating film imaginable.”<sup>126</sup>

This kind of affirming screening experience was surely encouraging in terms of the quality of and potential enjoyment in the films themselves. But since Dougherty and Paige saw the film workshops as a way to instill confidence in working class women and document the importance of women’s roles in the community, the film screenings were significant moments to help bring together community members who likely would not speak to one another outside of a shared film experience. Paige described the implications of these screenings: “These films show what women’s lives are like in a community. Usually they’re invisible. There are no community movies that show what it is like to be a mother and go to school. In these films women communicate their experiences. After a Spanish welfare mother and a Jewish housewife look at each other’s films they feel easier about each other, get to know each other.”<sup>127</sup>

In this brief statement, Paige actually says a lot about the way film’s “radical aspiration” was imagined in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Annette Michelson’s seminal essay, “Film and the Radical Aspiration,” charted out a history of how cinema’s “promise” was pronounced, from the 1920s film avant-garde through 1966, the year in which she published the article. Michelson claimed that “Cinema, on the verge of winning the battle for the recognition of its specificity—and every major filmmaker and critic the last half-century has fought that battle—is now

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<sup>125</sup> Margie Crow, Carol Anne Douglas, and Mecca Reliance, Reviews of films from Women’s Film Festival, *off our backs* 3, no. 11 (Oct 31, 1973): 8, <http://www.proquest.com>.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid.

<sup>127</sup> Gena Corea, “Frankly Feminist: Women Make Movies II” (paste-up of weekly column), *The New Republic Feature Syndicate* 29 (Washington, D.C.), November 16, 1973, Women Make Movies Papers.

engaged in a reconsideration of its aims.”<sup>128</sup> Its aims, in the specific scenario of the exhibition of Chelsea Picture Station films, were very much guided by an idealized vision of alternative cinema at this historical moment, articulated in terms of bridging women’s “real experiences” as portrayed in a given film with community progress. As it was described in a 1973 news article, “They [the Chelsea Picture Station] see film as a community resource. It is not only a means of self-expression, but in the hands of the local people, film becomes political as they tell their stories and teach one another about themselves.”<sup>129</sup>

As early as the spring of 1973, when WMM’s was still in its infancy, the group members were interested in connecting to other women’s film organizations in the United States and abroad. Several members presented films and talked about the Chelsea Picture Station at the Women’s International Film Festival in Toronto, which marked the second major international women’s film festival in North America (the first was in New York City in 1972, held before the Chelsea Picture Station existed but after WMM was founded). Years later in her recounting of a feminist film movement, B. Ruby Rich described these first two festivals as instigating an “immediate trend” based on their “instant success.”<sup>130</sup> Rich continues:

Here was proof positive that women were capable of something big, had made great films, and then—due to sheer sexist injustice—had been denied recognition, relegated instead to obscurity, early retirement, and the withdrawal of backing. The festivals had a shared rhetoric that carried the message of the day. Often the statements were collectively written, reflecting the organizational style of the

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<sup>128</sup> Annette Michelson, “Film and the Radical Aspiration”, *Film Culture Reader*, P. Adams Sitney, ed. (New York: Film Culture, 1970), 420.

<sup>129</sup> Clipping, *Valley Advocate*, November 14, 1973, Women Make Movies Papers.

<sup>130</sup> B. Ruby Rich, *Chick Flicks: Theories and Memories of the Feminist Film Movement* (Duke University Press, 1998), 30.

festivals themselves. Everything was dead serious: there was a point to be made. These festivals weren't being presented only for the fun of it. They had a mission.<sup>131</sup>

After participating in the festival in Toronto, which featured largely professional women filmmakers, Paige remained in Canada to tour various cities with the Women's Festival Group and make contacts with other women filmmakers. When she returned, Paige reported to other members through a note in the newsletter:

We did three-day festivals in Fredericton (New Brunswick), Halifax (Nova Scotia), St. John's (New Foundland) and a two-day festival in Charlottstown (Prince Edward Island). My jobs were general coordinator, helping repair and splice movies, giving Super-8 and Video workshops, and talking about C.P.S. movies. I had a lot of practical experience in publicizing and organizing festivals, considerable experience in humility (nobody had ever heard of film education), considerable experience and vivid frustration in the ways and means of Canadian University Audio-Visual Department (all men, tons of Sony equipment on groaning spotless shelves), Polaroid production experience, and some wonderful R & R (bird sanctuary, amethyst cliffs). Hopefully we will be seeing some of the S-8 movies, videotapes, and Polaroids.<sup>132</sup>

After the festival, the Chelsea Picture Station formulated a program idea that would help maintain their new relationships with other women filmmakers, by building into their schedule a weekly series of visitors from other film and women's organizations. Claudia Weill was among the Chelsea Picture Station's newly made friends from the Toronto festival and was named as a

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<sup>131</sup> Ibid.

<sup>132</sup> Sheila Paige, note in "Chelsea Picture Station Newsletter #2," July 1973, Women Make Movies Papers.

possibility for the new visitors series.<sup>133</sup> By this time Weill had made the documentary *The Home of Mrs. Levant Graham* (1971), which screened at the First International Festival of Women's Films (FIFWF) held in New York City in 1972, and *Joyce at 34* (1972) with Joyce Chopra. Weill became a well-known American film and television director in the late 1970s and early 1980s. By 1974, this "speaker series" idea seemed to have come to fruition at the Chelsea Picture Station.

A series of events and activities with speakers, called "CPS Soirées," included guests in the realm of video, writing, health, and experimental film. Teri Mack, a video artist from the Young Filmmakers Foundation, presented and spoke about tapes made by his elementary school students at a local school; the women's poetry group Harpies Bazaar read some poetry and conducted a workshop; the Women's Health Forum proposed various health workshops covering topics such as menopause, anatomy, sexuality, birth control, and doctors; and visual artist Madeleine Gekiere screened her new 8mm films and discussed her transition to experimental film after years working as a painter.<sup>134</sup>

Dougherty and Paige remained extremely busy with their teaching, Chelsea Picture Station workshops, and promoting the Chelsea Picture Station by networking with other institutions and women's organizations. For example, in 1972 Dougherty tried to initiate a professional relationship with her alma mater, Sarah Lawrence College, which was the first U.S. institution to offer a graduate degree in Women's History, starting that very year. She created a proposal that outlined three possible ways that Sarah Lawrence students could work with WMM's in tandem with their academic studies. The first was a series of screenings and discussions that featured sets of films made by young girls, teenagers, and adult women

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<sup>133</sup> "Chelsea Picture Station Newsletter," June 1973, Women Make Movies Papers.

<sup>134</sup> "Chelsea Picture Station Newsletter," March 1974, Women Make Movies Papers.

“documenting their own cultures.”<sup>135</sup> The second possibility proposed a field placement for SLC students to work at WMM’s, assisting film and video teachers, arranging screenings, and running special projects. The third possibility was focused on production, inviting a student to make a film with WMM’s for the SLC course “Women: Myth and Reality.”

While it is unclear if this program with Sarah Lawrence was ever put into practice, it is important to note here the importance of the development of Women’s Studies Programs (and later Gender and Sexuality Studies) in the 1970s. This was one concrete indication of the institutionalization of feminism in the U.S. university system, and it had many ramifications. Infusing curricula and scholarship in various fields with critical considerations of gender, race, and class not only sought to correct problematic historical omissions, to enrich teaching and research with important ideological questions (for example, by critiquing the white male literary canon in English Literature), but it also signaled the nascent surge in discourses of multiculturalism and identity politics. These tendencies in the 1970s and then 1980s, along with the continued expansion of Film Studies, created conditions in the U.S. university system that became well-matched to WMM’s programs and mission to make and circulate a diverse body of feminist media (these tendencies are explored in later chapters).

In the 1970s Dougherty sought additional teaching opportunities, and initiated a Pilot Video Project for a six-week summer Program at the Bedford Hills Correctional Facility in the summer of 1973, where she and Paige taught video to the women inmates. The major goal was to provide a group of women a means of expressing themselves by producing self-designed television programs. The schedule for each week’s meeting included time for production,

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<sup>135</sup> “Women Make Movies Proposals for SLC Women’s Study Program,” ca. August 1972, Women Make Movies Papers.



viewing, discussing, and planning as a group, and presenting the video programs to audiences.<sup>136</sup> When the six-week program was completed, the Correction Superintendent wrote a thank you to Dougherty: “We wish to thank you for the major contribution you made to the 1973 summer program here at the Bedford Hills Correctional Facility and for pioneering an art form that was obviously enjoyed by your students.”<sup>137</sup>

Attending film festivals became a highly important way to network with other women artists and exhibit Chelsea Picture Station films. In November 1973, Dougherty traveled to Berlin and Frankfurt, Germany, for a four-day Women’s Kinemathek Festival, where she brought Chelsea Picture Station movies to screen and talk about with festival audiences. In February 1974, Paige attended a festival in Ann Arbor, Michigan, called “Women In the Reel World,” where the Chelsea Picture Station movies were “warmly received.”<sup>138</sup> Women’s Film Festivals during this time were often as much about exhibiting contemporary work by women, such as films made in feminist workshops around the world or experimental work by well-known artists like Carolee Schneemann, as they were about excavating films by women in the past, such as those by Alice Guy Blaché and Lois Weber. B. Ruby Rich has discussed the “Women’s Film Festival” circuit of the early 1970s in her recollections of feminist film movements:

Not so terribly long ago, there was nothing at all routine about women setting out to make or exhibit films...Organizing a women’s film festival was first and foremost a research project. Such festivals weren’t a “ghetto” for women’s film...instead, they were the only chance, like those signs for gas before crossing the desert—in this case, emerging from a century long desert...The festivals were

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<sup>136</sup> “Proposal for a Pilot Video Program,” ca. March 1973, Women Make Movies Papers.

<sup>137</sup> Janice Warne, Letter to Ariel Dougherty, September 20, 1973, Women Make Movies Papers.

<sup>138</sup> “Chelsea Picture Station Newsletter,” February 1974, Women Make Movies Papers.

a secular worshiper's mystical occasion. No wonder an air of momentum and wonder hung over them.<sup>139</sup>

By 1973, even mainstream media recognition of burgeoning feminist art movements was finally bubbling to the surface. In a *New York Times* article from 1973, Laurie Johnston describes the general landscape of how women's activism instigated an alternative arts counterculture:

The women's movement, which keeps local activists so busy it has become a lifestyle socially as well as politically, is now inventing a counterculture of feminist "alternatives" in arts and letters too. Many feminists, combining sisterhood with self-expression, are working in the arts collectively, often in church or community-center basements, in shop or apartment backrooms or in any scrounged space.<sup>140</sup>

But by early 1974, the Chelsea Picture Station had outgrown its church basement. Other groups shared the space and it lacked security for film and video equipment. In early February, WMM's relocated to a much larger loft space above a garage on West 19<sup>th</sup> street, still in Chelsea, but no longer in the heart of the neighborhood. The new, large, loft accommodated workshops, office space, and screening space for an audience of fifty.<sup>141</sup> By mid-1974, the women of the Chelsea Picture Station also had begun a massive undertaking to help organize a large-scale international meeting of women's film organizations, which was eventually named the Conference of Feminist Film and Video Organizations. The film and video workshops continued to attract women from all over New York City; reviews of films were appearing in women's

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<sup>139</sup> B. Ruby Rich, *Chick Flicks: Theories and Memories of the Feminist Film Movement* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), 29.

<sup>140</sup> Laurie Johnston, "Women Activism Turns to Alternatives in Arts," *The New York Times*, March 21, 1973.

<sup>141</sup> Pennee Bender, "Women Make Movies Inc: Portrait of a Grassroots Women's Organization in the 1970s and 1980s," unpublished manuscript, Women Make Movies Papers.

newspapers and journals such as *off our backs*, and the Chelsea Picture Station received invitations to film festivals and women's events all across the United States.

An "air of momentum" was rising, indeed.

## **2.0 FEMINIST MEDIA GROUPS AND THE POLITICS OF DIFFERENCE**

Among the precedents WMM's established during its earliest years operating the Chelsea Picture Station was a priority to consistently network and connect with other feminist media groups to share resources, strategies, and films. Attempting to join forces and cooperate with like-minded individuals and groups and to stay abreast of their activities may seem like a wise and obvious impulse for small but rapidly growing organizations, but, as we will see, it also became a matter of friction for some feminist groups in the 1970s in the United States. In this chapter I discuss a paradox within feminist media organizing through an analytical history of the 1975 Conference of Feminist Film and Video Organizations, which situates the event and its aftermath in larger political and social contexts of second wave feminism. The chapter concludes with a discussion of how WMM's restructuring in the mid-1970s and conversations about future directions established a meaningful foundation for institutional stability.

In addition to producing films, a major focus of feminist film activity in the 1970s was holding conferences for feminist media makers in addition to planning film festivals to screen their work. The beginning of 1975 in particular was a fertile time for feminist media networking. From February 1-2, WMM hosted a massive gathering of feminist media organizations from around the country in "Womanhattan" for a Conference of Feminist Film and Video Organizations (CFFVO), which more than seventy groups attended. On March 29-30 a "sister" conference, called The Feminist Eye: A Conference of Women in Film, Video, and Television

was held in Los Angeles and was organized by other feminist media organizers for more West-coast oriented feminist groups. The two conferences sprang up independently, and then discovered that they “had the same goals and shared values.”<sup>1</sup> Frances Reid and Cathy Zheutlin, who worked on The Feminist Eye in Los Angeles, wrote that the two conferences were seen as “the beginnings of a national feminist film and video network,” and that “each conference reaches a different broad audience, and through our connectedness, we’ve been able to do complementary work, learn from each other, and avoid duplication.”<sup>2</sup> In the spirit of support and feminist networking, representatives from each conference attended the other.

The CFFVO was co-sponsored by and held at the International House on Riverside Drive in Manhattan, whose staff members offered the facilities for conference events and childcare as part of their celebration of the United Nations International Women’s Year.<sup>3</sup> The other major resources included additional funding from First National City Bank and office space and conference organizing labor from WMM’s.<sup>4</sup> I will spend a fair amount of time here discussing the circumstances around planning the CFFVO, the event itself, and its consequences. I do so because first, it was a major undertaking for WMM in the mid-1970s and was orchestrated largely by Ariel Dougherty, Sheila Paige, Laurel Seibert, and other WMM members, and second, it provides a fruitful occasion to examine some of the tendencies, trials, and tensions of feminist organizing efforts in the small groups era, particularly as they effected WMM and feminist film groups at large.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Statement of Relation, March 14, 1975, Women Make Movies Papers.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Invitation to National Conference of Feminist Film and Video Organizations, Women Make Movies Papers.

<sup>4</sup> Conference of Feminist Film and Video Organizations Program, February 1-2, 1975, Women Make Movies Papers.

<sup>5</sup> Activist and scholar Jo Freeman coined the phrase “the small groups” to characterize the tremendous proliferation of local and often issue-specific collectives, centers, and groups in the 1970s, which were practical applications of radical feminism; some prominent examples are the Boston Women’s Health Book Collective, which published the

Invitations to the CFFVO identified the broad topics for discussion as those “relating to the content of the productions we do, consequences of our group structure, [the] relation of media groups to the broader feminist movement, [and the] relation of media groups to society at large.”<sup>6</sup> A “critical focus” of the two conferences was to “establish economic priorities” for feminist media groups, to utilize fully the existing funding sources, to broaden the distribution of films and videos, and to increase their impact.<sup>7</sup>

The organizational stages of the New York conference in late 1974 are notable for the ways in which they reflected a collaborative feminist ethos. Further, the organizers’ prescience about the conference’s momentousness—both in its contemporary moment and in light of a larger feminist film history—seems evident in their various preparations. For example, the “marketing” or outreach for the conference surpassed the “usual suspects” of individual filmmakers, feminist production collectives, women performance artists, and the like. The renown scholar, New York University professor, and critic Annette Michelson, who, in 1974 was already regarded as a major critical “athlete” in the realm of art, film, and culture and had published the seminal essay on alternative cinema “Film and the Radical Aspiration” in 1966, was invited personally to attend or write about the CCFVO, although it is unclear if she did either.<sup>8</sup> The organizers also personally invited Molly Haskell, whose book *From Reverence to*

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infamous *Our Bodies, Ourselves* and Bay Area Women Against Rape, which opened in 1971 and triggered the formation of rape crisis centers all over the country; see the chapter “The Small Groups” in Jo Freeman, *The Politics of Women’s Liberation: A Case Study of an Emerging Social Movement and its Relation to the Policy Process* (iUniverse, 2000).

<sup>6</sup> Invitation to National Conference of Feminist Film and Video Organizations, Women Make Movies Papers.

<sup>7</sup> Laurel Seibert, Press Release: “Feminist Film and Video Organizations Establish Priorities,” ca. January 1975, Women Make Movies Papers.

<sup>8</sup> In an anthology of essays published in honor of Michelson, Malcom Turvey describes her multiple roles as a critic, editor, educator, and translator in multiple arenas such as film, art, modernism, and criticism itself as a demonstration of “critical athleticism” from a scholar who created a “new paradigm of interpretation.” See Richard Allen and Malcolm Turvey, eds., *Camera Obscura, Camera Lucida: Essays in Honor of Annette Michelson* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2003), 13-34.

*Rape: The Treatment of Women in the Movies* came out in 1974 and was one of three early volumes of feminist film criticism (the others were Marjorie Rosen's *Popcorn Venus* [1973], and Joan Mellen's *Women and their Sexuality in the New Film* [1974]). Haskell's attendance there is unspecified also.

Although there was a New York-based conference planning committee comprised mainly of WMM members, it sought both general feedback and specific ideas and suggestions from women's media groups nationwide through elaborate surveys and questionnaires distributed by mail in the months before the conference. For example, to accommodate the attending groups as well as possible, the committee solicited information in advance not only about the number of individuals attending from each organization but also about how many women would need housing and for how many nights, and how many would need childcare. This is remarkable conference planning especially in light of its historical moment; this was well before national conferences considered the need for childcare or made arrangements for it (and many still do not). Aside from these generous personal considerations, the planning committee sought professional input regarding the structure, scope, and content of the conference itself.

A four-page survey that was sent out in the fall of 1974 solicited scores of women's media groups (those that were participating in the conference and those that were not able to attend) for information about their members and how many "survive economically on film and/or video-related work," the kinds of production equipment the group owned, the films the group produced and/or distributed, their funding sources, and other practical concerns. Furthermore, those groups that filled out the questionnaire could vote for and comment on the proposed topics for conference panels, rating each topic as "good," "bad," or "so-so."

The proposed conference session topics were fairly comprehensive, ranging from the content of Hollywood film versus that of independent film, to ways of organizing media groups, to questioning the relationship media groups have with broader feminist concerns. Interestingly, the one topic that stood out quite strongly as an *unfavorable* panel subject (indicated by numerous “bad” and some “so-so” ratings in the questionnaires) concerned the distinction between *feminist* content and *women’s* content, suggesting, perhaps, that respondents did not see a distinction between the two, or, at least, did not see making such a distinction as an important goal at that moment, perhaps because many viewed women’s making films a feminist act in itself, and perhaps because it was (and remains) a vexed question.<sup>9</sup>

The most popular questions proposed for panels (as indicated by a majority of “good” ratings) included one asking about the relative strengths of different film forms—i.e. the strengths and weaknesses of fiction, documentary, and narrative journalism. Other questions included:

1. Are we as feminists responsible to avoid bias against race, age, class, sexual orientation? Are we responsible to represent all the kinds of women who are unrepresented in commercial media?
2. What advantages and problems are there in non-hierarchical assignment of duties in production? Post-production? Distribution?
3. How does the ideal of non-competitiveness affect how our groups work? Should this ideal be extended further? Are there means whereby we can prevent competition between feminist media groups to our mutual advantage?

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<sup>9</sup> “National Conference of Feminist Film and Video Organizations Questionnaire,” ca. November 1974, Women Make Movies Papers.



4. How do we know what kinds of films and videotapes the women's community needs and wants? What purposes vis a vis [sic.] the women's movement could be served by a network of communication between media groups?<sup>10</sup>

These panel topics are revealing for the ways their inclusive feminist politics complicate how we typically think about historical accounts of women and film in the 1970s. The early years of "second wave" feminism is so frequently dominated by a narrative concerning how white, middle-class heterosexual feminists tended to elide issues of race, class, ethnicity, and sexual preference. Beyond the obvious concern with these issues expressed in Question #1, are two other important presumptions on Questions #2 and #3: that feminist organizing be non-hierarchical and non-competitive. These concepts (counterposed to patriarchal modes of behavior) circulated widely at the time, and buttressed the promise that consciousness-raising and new forms of political organization would lead eventually to real social change. Alternatives to hierarchy in organizing were central to not only feminist ideology of the 1970s, but also to the wider political imaginary of the left in the 1970s and scores of social change groups.<sup>11</sup>

Of the completed conference surveys that I was able to synthesize, there was one additional set of questions (inquiring about the priorities of feminist media groups) that seemed to resonate with virtually all of the respondents, as suggested by a majority of "good" ratings and only one "so-so" rating, as well as inserted asterisks and comments indicating "we feel this is the most important question."<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Starting in 1970 (and throughout the 1970s) Jo Freeman analyzed how the principles of non-hierarchical organization actually played out in political groups. Her influential writing and speeches on the "tyranny of structurelessness" argued that without formal structures in non-hierarchical organizations, relations of power still emerge, but they do so in more insidious ways. See Jo Freeman, "The Tyranny of Structurelessness," <http://www.jofreeman.com/joreen/tyranny.htm>.

<sup>12</sup> "National Conference of Feminist Film and Video Organizations Questionnaire," ca. November 1974, Women Make Movies Papers.

Interestingly, this set of reflective questions is symptomatic of a larger historical tendency within the feminist movement to engage in persistent self-reflexivity, perhaps in the sense of Marxist self-critique, about goals, priorities, strategies, and responsibilities. The specific reflexive questions that were prioritized by numerous feminist media groups in 1974 included: “What are our priorities? To do professional level work? To educate? What are the advantages, disadvantages [of each]? What has our evolution as groups led us to change about our priorities? What are realistic goals for survival in terms of priorities?”<sup>13</sup>

## **2.1 CONFERENCE OF FEMINIST MEDIA ORGANIZATIONS**

The final CCFVO program of events reflected an impressive range of concerns and conversations for a two-day conference. The first day, Saturday, February 1<sup>st</sup>, began with an introductory talk, “Process and Focus of the Conference of Feminist Film and Video Organizations,” by Ann Volkes, a video artist from the Women’s Interart Center in New York. The opening session also included presenters Mayo Karng and Hugh Kilmer from the conference’s main sponsor, First National City Bank, and a representative, Ellen Raider, from the host location, International House. The seven main sessions over the two-day conference included Priorities, Needs of the Women’s Movement/Community, Non-Competitiveness, Feminist Content and Women’s Content, Establishing a Network of Communications, Working Group Action Planning, and Conclusions.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Conference of Feminist Film and Video Organizations Program, February 1-2, 1975, Women Make Movies Papers.

Saturday's first major session on Priorities included four presentations: "Working for Television and Working for Yourself" by Ellen Shub (Cambridge Documentary Films), "Given the Economy, What are our Priorities?" by Ariel Dougherty (WMM), "Video Group/Women's Group: Establishing Our Goals" by Cathy Whalen (Women's Video Co-operative), and "Lesbianism" by Elana Nachman (Women's Film Co-op). The panel on Needs of the Women's Movement/Community included "Putting Together a Women's Video Festival" by Ann Volkes and Susan Milano (Women's Interart Center), "Documenting Women's Activities" by Evan Morley (Video Women), "Audience Influence on Future Productions" by Bonnie Friedman and Deborah Shaffer (Pandora Films), and "Hollywood and Otherwise: Advancing on Both Fronts" by Frances Reid and Cathy Zheutlin (The Feminist Eye). Non-Competitiveness, the third major session on Saturday, included "Working Collectively with Other Women" by Alice Steinicke (Ann Arbor Women's Video Workshop), "Non-competitiveness and Inter-group Activity" by Phyllis Gomperts and Tayloe Ross (Women's Video Project), and "Professionalism" by Irene Yesser-Ringwa (Women's Film Co-op). Kay Gardner (Women's Music Network) and Ann Volkes (Women's Interart Center) presented on "Feminist Content and Women's Content," despite that the pre-conference questionnaires suggested that this was not a topic of major interest for many of the participants.

Sunday's agenda began with a large meeting, "Establishing a Network of Communications," and also developed specific topics for an afternoon breakout session for small working groups. The remainder of the conference on Sunday afternoon included time for discussion and planning in small groups working on specific issues, followed by a final large meeting of conclusions, "recap[s] of workgroups' recommendations, adoption of policies, grand

finale.”<sup>15</sup> On Sunday evening, the lesbian feminist singer/songwriter, activist, and a founder of the alternative women’s music movement, Margie Adam, performed a closing concert for conference attendees at the Women’s Coffeehouse in the West Village.<sup>16</sup> Adam became a friend of WMM and the CFFVO organizers and an active voice in scrutinizing the politics of the women’s movement and analyzing assumptions about audiences; her conversations with WMM members will be discussed later in the chapter.

With the aim to enrich the collaborative dialogue of the individual conference panels, the organizing committee urged participating groups to write position papers responding to any of the panel topics in advance of the conference itself. The proposed conference agenda explained that these position papers could “be read at the beginning of relevant workshops—quickly focusing discussion, giving workshop participants something to react to, inviting comparison and definition.”<sup>17</sup> Writing a position paper on a specific topic was also a way for media groups that were unable to attend the conference in New York in person to still participate in the conference by sharing their ideas, approaches, and political investments with the rest of the conference’s attendees.

The Women’s Video Project in New York, which identified itself as “a video group in the Women’s Movement,” wrote a provocative position paper on the subject of inclusion and the dynamics of race, class, and sexuality in feminist organizing. The document offers a valuable glimpse at how some feminist groups, who have been historically ascribed a position within “racist, exclusive” second wave feminism, were in fact self-consciously critiquing the gender,

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Interestingly, Adam’s relationship to social cultures of film exceeded her many fans in 1970s feminist film groups; she later wrote a tribute to Greta Garbo for *Outlook* magazine called “Lesbians Know What They Know,” which film scholar Judith Mayne quotes in her discussion of Garbo as an object of fascination for queer film viewers; see chapter eight in Judith Mayne, *Cinema and Spectatorship* (Psychology Press, 1993).

<sup>17</sup> Laurel Seibert, Letter to women’s media groups, December 23, 1974, Women Make Movies Papers.

race, and class dynamics within the movement's various arms—in this case, the realm of feminist media production. It is also noteworthy that inclusion of lesbian voices and real concern for their perspectives was an important component of the agenda. The three writers of the paper, Gretchen Bruskewicz, Phyllis Gomperts, and Tayloe Ross, stated:

Excluded from control of media, as from the power structure of government, were women, including lesbians, black men and women, Puerto Ricans, blue collar and service workers, the disabled, the very old, the young, gay men—in sum, the vast majority of our population. As women in media we feel that we must address our goals to the inclusion of women previously excluded into our structure and activities. *So long as such disempowered women fail to create their own media, they are passively manipulated by those who do...* We do not want to be white heterosexual women who manipulate disempowered women—to be a passive structural counterpart to male dominated media.<sup>18</sup>

Much has been said about the race, class, and heterosexist biases of second wave feminism, which has been mythologized in American culture as a predominantly white, middle-class movement of the 1960s and 1970s. Interestingly, there seems to be a visible split between the academic realm of theory and criticism and film practices and activism. In Sara Evans' history of second wave feminism, aptly titled *Tidal Wave: How Women Changed America at Century's End*, she describes how “cracks” between radical activists of color and white activists divided women's liberation groups to the extent that by 1970, “radical feminist groups were overwhelmingly white—even more so than their liberal counterparts.”<sup>19</sup> Despite that women's

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<sup>18</sup> Position Paper, the Women's Video Project, ca. February 1975, Women Make Movies Papers, Women Make Movies, New York, NY, my emphasis.

<sup>19</sup> Sara Evans, *Tidal Wave: How Women Changes America at Century's End*, (New York: Free Press, 2003), 32.

liberation groups frequently appropriated the “rhetoric of black nationalism,” according to Evans, these “cracks” were frequently the result of white feminists’ obliviousness about how social capital (shared networks, language, and experiences) facilitated their organizing and a fundamental misunderstandings about definitions of “militancy” among black women radicals.<sup>20</sup> Unsuccessful outreach to women of color was thus perceived as a major flaw among a majority of radical feminist groups and brought about a conception of an exclusive paradigm at a vital moment for the women’s liberation movement in 1970.

What is interesting about the statement on race and “disempowered” women in media from the Women’s Video Project for the CFFVO is not that the presumed linkage of making media and empowerment was made explicit (since this was a widely held view at the time), but that the *inverse* was made explicit: “failing” to make your own media equaled, essentially, certain manipulation and oppression. In its focus on passivity, the position paper denied, in some way, the possibility of active critical viewing by any audiences who, for various incalculable reasons, did not want to or could not pursue media production. It also suggested that if feminist media groups failed at their goal of inclusion—or recruitment in some sense—then they necessarily became “a passive structural counterpart” to the very dominant, oppressive media systems they were trying to work outside of and resist.

These assessments could be read as especially radical, but significantly, the sense of urgency and declarative tone of the position paper evinced a shift in conscientiousness regarding this notion of inclusion and fissures between black radical groups and feminist groups, a kind of corrective that came to light by the mid-1970s. Still, by recognizing and critiquing the power structures that excluded women, people of color, and others in the realm of media production, the

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

Women's Video Project position paper made clear the tensions around identity and inclusion that some feminists in media apprehended as a major challenge within the women's movement.

A critique related to that of the Women's Video Project came from the Women's Film Co-op from Northampton, Massachusetts, whose members wrote to the New York CFFVO committee in January 1975 with a few significant comments about the proposed conference sessions. Elana Nachman wrote on behalf of the group:

I notice lesbians aren't mentioned *once* – and I feel bad about that—not only are we invisible in the “straight” media, but also in “women's” media...There should be a considerable block of time devoted to the problems/directions of lesbians in the media—[especially] designed for lesbians to come together (taking into account such outrages as the “flowers of evil” show on television about lesbians; and the “heavy” things the CLIT papers say about media and feminist media)...I hope this happens in the final agenda (more than hope—need).<sup>21</sup>

Describing the pre-history of the conflict between lesbian feminists and the women's movement, historian Vicki Eaklor states, “If radicals felt there were limits to the women's movement as it reemerged in the sixties, lesbians and bisexual women, whether liberal or radical, had plenty of reason to agree.”<sup>22</sup> Founded in 1966, the National Organization of Women (NOW) often was equated with the women's movement at large in the late 1960s and was outright hostile towards lesbians through 1970. Even though NOW changed its position by 1971 with a resolution that stated “NOW acknowledges the oppression of lesbians as a legitimate concern of

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<sup>21</sup> Elana Nachman, letter to Sheila Paige and conference committee, January 2, 1975, Women Make Movies Papers; “Flowers of Evil” was an episode of the 1970s police drama *Police Woman* that sparked national controversy for its negative depiction of lesbian stereotypes; the “CLIT” papers refer to statements by the Collective Lesbian International Terrors printed in *Dyke: a Quarterly*, published 1975-1979 in New York City.

<sup>22</sup> Vicki Lynn Eaklor, *Queer America: a GLBT History of the 20th Century* (ABC-CLIO, 2008), 144.

feminism,” as a widely recognized institutional icon for the women’s movement, NOW had set a disturbing precedent about inclusion.<sup>23</sup>

In short, lesbian feminists worked in both the women’s movement and gay (male) liberation, but found “both movements lacking in sensitivity to lesbians, and as willing as the larger culture to silence or marginalize them.”<sup>24</sup> Winifred D. Wandersee, in her account of the women’s movement in the 1970s, argues:

The ideological rationale for a lesbian life-style seemed the logical extension of a woman-centered identity, and for that reason, some lesbian feminists began to perceive their position as politically more correct than one that allowed for heterosexuality. The internal politics of the movement were colored by the intense ideological significance that was placed on this issue.<sup>25</sup>

Frustration with the treatment of lesbians within “mainstream” feminism led to the emergence of lesbian separatism in the early 1970s as a distinct form of radical feminism. These women maintained that lesbianism was not a matter of sexual preference, but a political choice, and in fact a vital one that would intensify the struggle against patriarchy. By mandating what they saw as “proper sexual behavior,” they alienated many heterosexual feminists who viewed them as lesbian chauvinists.<sup>26</sup> Even though only a portion of lesbian feminists took up the politics of lesbian separatism, the forceful and sometimes arrogant presence of this faction greatly impacted how lesbians were regarded in the movement at large.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid, 145.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Winifred D. Wandersee, *On the Move: American Women in the 1970s* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1988), 67.

<sup>26</sup> Alice Echols, *Daring to be Bad: Radical Feminism in America, 1967-1975* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 232.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, 234.



The CFFVO yielded willingly to the gravity of Nachman's comments regarding lesbians; according to the CFFVO's final agenda, Nachman herself led a conversation on the topic of "Lesbianism" as part of the conference session on "Priorities." Unfortunately, the conference proceedings were not recorded, and thus it is difficult to surmise the outcomes of this particular session or the others.

Nachman's second point of concern in her letter to the conference committee dealt with the need to address professionalism and how filmmakers treat one another in the realm of alternative media. She and the co-op members wanted several issues to be addressed "clearly" at the conference, including notions of "making a name for yourself," "star trips," and "all the subtle differences between 'artists' and 'workers,'" reflecting a Marxist undertone related to the idea of artists as cultural workers.<sup>28</sup> Observations Nachman made about the perceived differences between different types of labor in media and class dynamics are suggestive: "I notice, for instance, for myself the *sharp* difference in how 'feminists' treat me depending on whether they see me as a 'shit worker' in the women's film co-op or as a woman who's published a novel—successful artist—and it always blows me away."<sup>29</sup>

The recognition of blatant discrimination that Nachman alluded to reflected another conflict that second wave feminists faced as they organized for political change. In response to a Marxist focus on class struggle as the path to overcome other kinds of oppression (i.e. sexism), many versions of radical feminism asserted that women made up a class, and that this was the "primary contradiction."<sup>30</sup> And yet, a lack of class understanding beyond Marx's definition of a relationship to the means of production led many women from various pockets of the women's

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<sup>28</sup> Elana Nachman, letter to Sheila Paige and conference committee, January 2, 1975, Women Make Movies Papers.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Evans, 120.

movement to separate and form their own alliances. Historian Alice Echols credits the vanguard cadre *The Furies* in particular for a brave and important analysis of class dynamics within women's liberation.<sup>31</sup> Renowned lesbian writer and *Furies* member Rita Mae Brown argued that the women's movement needed to understand that class involved behavior and how people are taught to behave, experiences that validated particular assumptions about life, expectations that are held, conceptions of the future, how problems are understood and solved, and how thoughts, feelings, and actions developed.<sup>32</sup> Also writing in 1974 from the *Furies* collective, Charlotte Bunch and Nancy Myron explained that the primary reactionary response to moves toward greater class awareness in the women's movement had been "to retreat from the issue and label it divisive to a feminist movement."<sup>33</sup> In a collection of essays put together from *The Furies*, they continued:

Class is indeed divisive to feminism. So too, is race. So is lesbianism...However, they are not divisive because those on the short end of the stick begin to scream. They are divisive because the more privileged white, middle and upper class women have not recognized how they and the movement are oppressive and have not taken effective action to eliminate or at least work against class, race, and heterosexual oppression.<sup>34</sup>

The issues regarding race, class, and sexuality raised in Nachman's letter and the Women's Video Project position paper discussed above reflect a core point of contention within the historiography of second wave feminism: that the second wave, put simply, was inattentive

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<sup>31</sup> See Echols, 203-238.

<sup>32</sup> Rita Mae Brown, "The Last Straw," in *Class and Feminism: A Collection of Essays from The Furies*, eds. Charlotte Bunch and Nancy Myron (Baltimore: Diana Press, 1974), 15.

<sup>33</sup> Charlotte Bunch and Nancy Myron, eds., *Class and Feminism: A Collection of Essays from The Furies* (Baltimore: Diana Press, 1974), 10.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

and insensitive to difference. Despite the parallels between the movements for racial and economic justice and for women's liberation, Evans claims that the particular issues affecting women of color "were treated as anomalies and frequently ignored," and that this conflict became a "central dilemma" as well as a "powerful theoretical concern" as feminism developed in post-1970s United States.<sup>35</sup>

Describing the particularly difficult dilemma for black women, distinguished social activist, writer, and educator Toni Cade wrote in 1970:

...the black movement is primarily concerned with the liberation of blacks as a class and does not promote women's liberation as a priority...The feminist movement, on the other hand, is concerned with the oppression of women as a class, but is almost totally composed of white females. Thus the black woman finds herself on the outside of both political entities, in spite of the fact that she is the object of both forms of oppression.<sup>36</sup>

Still, some cultural historians have nuanced the racist image of second-wave feminism.<sup>37</sup> Evans, who describes multiple instances of racial fragmentation within women's liberation and between white feminists and black radicals, asserts that the continuing assumption that the women's movement in the 1970s was a middle-class white phenomenon "falls short," and points to the example of numerous minority women who were hugely influential voices from the literary realm and impacted social and political discourse—Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, and Audre

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<sup>35</sup> Evans, 16.

<sup>36</sup> Quoted in Evans, 117.

<sup>37</sup> For just a few examples, see Dorothy Sue Cobble, *The Other Women's Movement: Workplace Justice and Social Rights in Modern America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005); Ruth Rosen, *The World Split Open: How the Modern Women's Movement Changed America*, Revised Edition, (Penguin, 2006); and Kimberly Springer, *Living for the Revolution: Black Feminist Organizations, 1968-1980* (Duke University Press, 2005).

Lorde, to name just a few.<sup>38</sup> Further, even in the mid-1970s, scholarly essays emerged to critique the ethnocentricity of some of the major feminist theorists, as in Margaret A. Simons' article "Racism and Feminism: A Schism in the Sisterhood," which analyzes the writing of Mary Daly, Simone de Beauvoir, Kate Millett, and Robin Morgan to expose their lack of attention to differences in women's experiences.<sup>39</sup> And as social movement historian Nancy Maclean points out, "when the focus of inquiry turns from the youthful women's liberation activists, often students, to the usually older working women who mobilized around issues of employment and focused on changing public policy, the [second wave feminist] movement looks more diverse and more attentive to bread-and-butter needs."<sup>40</sup> This claim speaks also to the difference between students in the academy and activists.

The assumption that second wave feminism embodied racism, classism, and heterosexism, as American studies scholar Amy Farrell puts it, "is simply inaccurate."<sup>41</sup> As another scholar, Lisa M. Hogeland suggests, it has become a "truism" that the second wave was rife with racial biases; but "such a blanket argument writes out of our history the enormous and important contributions of women of color in the 1970s."<sup>42</sup> In addition, as Farrell points out, underlying the assumption that second wave feminism was inattentive to diversity is another assumption that "all second wave feminist activists and organizations would have been 'successful' if only they had acknowledged differences...yet the evidence from these activists lives and organizations suggests that issues of diversity, complexity, and bridge building were at

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<sup>38</sup> Evans, 119.

<sup>39</sup> Margaret A. Simons, "Racism and Feminism: A Schism in the Sisterhood" in *Feminist Studies* 5.2 (Summer 1979): 384-401.

<sup>40</sup> Nancy MacLean, *Freedom Is Not Enough: The Opening of the American Workplace* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008), 118.

<sup>41</sup> Amy Farrell, "Attentive to Difference: Ms. Magazine, Coalition Building, and Sisterhood," in *Feminist Coalitions: Historical Perspectives on Second-wave Feminism in the United States*, ed. Stephanie Gilmore (University of Illinois Press, 2008), 49.

<sup>42</sup> Lisa M. Hogeland, quoted in Henry, 33.

the heart of their endeavors.”<sup>43</sup> Farrell further suggests that the reasons feminist groups often failed (as in, did not last long) had nothing to do with indifference, “but rather...the difficulty of creating and sustaining feminist progressive movements.”<sup>44</sup>

Moreover, the persistent historical hijacking of second-wave feminist movements by narratives of white middle-class domination continues to reinforce perceptions about a “generation gap” and a hierarchy of feminist waves in terms of their *perceived* liberal progressiveness. For example, Women and Gender Studies scholar Astrid Henry’s book *Not My Mother’s Sister* analyzes how repeating the notion that the second wave was predominantly white and racist “enables younger feminists to present their new wave as more progressive and inclusive than that of their second-wave predecessors;” Henry writes “Feminism’s history cannot be reduced to a simple narrative in which the ‘bad’ white racist second wave was replaced by the ‘good’ racially diverse and antiracist third wave.”<sup>45</sup> Since the so-called “first wave” of feminism, or suffragist period, had already been historicized as predominantly white, this was an influencing factor in how “second wave” feminists addressed issues around diversity.

It is not my interest here to attempt to “streamline” a history that is full of contradictions. Rather, consistent with a feminist historiography of WMM, I want to call attention to these very contradictions in the historiography of feminism and demonstrate how WMM’s activities and undertakings in the mid-1970s in fact embodied these contradictions. As a feminist media group that was not explicitly aligned with a particular political faction, WMM was very much entangled in the second wave’s multiplicity of political energies.

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid, 50.

<sup>45</sup> Astrid Henry, *Not My Mother’s Sister: Generational Conflict and Third-wave Feminism* (Indiana University Press, 2004), 33.

While radical feminism was predicated on rejecting the New Left's privileging of race and class over gender in order to "subordinate class and race to gender and speak hyperbolically about a universal sisterhood," multiple positions within a larger conception of women's liberation were staked out. One branch, for instance, emphasized the primacy of class (following the New Left, echoing decades of Marxist influence); another the merging of sex and class (socialist feminists), another the ideological aspect of female nature (cultural feminism), and another the role of lesbianism as a political tool (lesbian separatists).<sup>46</sup>

WMM's early foresight regarding inclusion, and its commitment to cultivating a diverse film workshop that reflected the breadth of its neighborhood, established meaningful conditions to empower women through making media in a welcoming, supportive environment. WMM's initial project—a neighborhood workshop to teach filmmaking to "everyday" women in a multi-racial working class community in New York City—was already automatically committed to a certain kind of feminist production and set of representational practices that actively sought out women members from diverse ethnicities, races, classes, sexual orientations, ages, and experiences. Ariel Dougherty explained the deceptively simple, perhaps idealized, rationale of the organization in an interview:

I think one of the critical reasons why we in WMM are interested in encouraging a lot of different women to get involved in filmmaking is that there are lots and lots of different kinds of women out there, and only the people who are those people can best express [their experiences]...I mean, the experience of being a Spanish welfare mother with three kids and not enough money to live on, that's just not my experience, and I can't talk about that...But the one thing I can do is

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<sup>46</sup> Echols, 10.

teach people how to make movies, I can give them the tools...to say yes, I can do something.<sup>47</sup>

While WMM was not immune to conflicts related to inclusion and diversity, far from it, its originating commitment to diversity, and to a sustained dialogue about it among its members, was a vital piece of WMM's basic foundation, and the co-founders' diligence and foresight in this regard have shaped the organization in innumerable ways.

The organizational stages of the CFFVO, the conference sessions themselves, their outcomes, and WMM's persistent grappling with issues of diversity are testaments to the ways in which some organizations, working within a period historicized often as racist, exclusive second wave feminism, endeavored to build coalitions and critically address the complexities of feminist organizing with diverse women and women's experiences. Moreover, the "Womanfesto" that developed as a result of the CFFVO (and will be discussed later in the chapter) affirmed a political commitment to battling against oppression, "as it manifests itself in sexism, heterosexism, classism, racism, ageism, and imperialism."<sup>48</sup> These points certainly do not nullify Nachman's testimony about apparently severe class discrimination in her feminist film co-op, but they do contribute some subtleties to the particular history of second wave feminism that has frequently prevailed and is, in some ways, misleading.

Despite the criticism leveled at the CFFVO before the actual conference, or perhaps, because of it, the conference attendees' experiences seemed to be very positive overall; the records of responses reflected feelings of excitement, energy and enthusiasm about the spirit of cooperation and inclusion that the conference nurtured. One participant, Sharon Karp, wrote an

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<sup>47</sup> Ariel Dougherty Papers, 1946-1993, Interview by Barbara Halpern Martineau, October 12, 1974; MC 589, folder 12.8.

<sup>48</sup> "Conference of Feminist Film and Video Organizations: An Ongoing Manifesto," ca. February 1975, Women Make Movies Papers.

article about her experience of the conference for *Lavender Woman*, a feminist newspaper that was produced collectively in Chicago:

The workshops I attended varied in degrees of interest and enthusiasm. The one on lesbianism raised some interesting class questions as we discussed realistic goals of Lesbians in the media. Another one, Hollywood and otherwise, precipitated discussion in terms of our relations with the industry. Many wanted alternatives, some wanted to discuss changing it. We learned Paramount is owned by Gulf and Western, and were reminded that silver to make film is mined in South Africa by exploited labor. So much for big productions, we will focus energy on alternatives...Sunday night Margie [Adam] gave a wonderful concert, we all kissed goodbye, feeling warm, unified. The next day we traveled back to our organizations and work in different places, but our goals and strength were in the same place.<sup>49</sup>

Barbara Halpern Martineau (who later changed her name to Sara Halprin), known today for her significant contributions to feminist documentary filmmaking and theory wrote a letter to Laurel Seibert, Ariel Dougherty, and Sheila Paige to thank them for “a mind-blowing, life-changing few days of intense activity and opportunity to meet with fine women.”<sup>50</sup> Martineau continued, “I know nothing like this has happened before, and I’m convinced that much will come of it...I came away full of plans and hopes and changed ideas about our future work in film in Canada. It will take a while before I’ve sorted out in my mind the intense experience of the conference.”<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Sharon Karp, “NYC: Feminist Film and Video Conference,” February 1975, Women Make Movies Papers.

<sup>50</sup> Barbara Halpern Martineau, Letter to conference organizers, February 3, 1975, Women Make Movies Papers.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.



While she was based in Toronto in the 1970s, Martineau was quite involved in the “first wave” of feminist film festivals and women’s film culture in New York City, and in particular, she was extremely interested in WMM. Although, she wrote in 1975, “there are many American women working collectively in film,” she recognized a certain uniqueness in WMM’s women and project: “they [WMM] seem to be such a strong and continuing focus for other women working in media, and their problems are paradigms of the basic problems facing women who are working independently of the established film industry.”<sup>52</sup> Because of her special interest in WMM, Martineau organized a series of interviews and conversations with WMM members following the CFFVO, one of which was held in March 1975—immediately following the CFFVO and before the Feminist Eye. Before the transcribed interviews, Martineau described the atmosphere surrounding WMM’s workshop space and the “feel” within it during her visit:

257 West 19<sup>th</sup> Street has a blue garage door, with a smaller door bearing a WMM logo...It’s the Chelsea area of New York, a mixed neighborhood of Spanish-speaking people, trendy refugees from Greenwich Village, small businesses...Behind the blue door is a cement courtyard with a garage at the back, and a flight of iron stairs leading to the loft space which houses WMM. One very large room, partitioned into editing space, screening space, desk areas, and a few armchairs around a low table for talking: apart from location shooting and public screenings, all of WMM’s activities as a teaching workshop, production studio, distribution company, and organizing center are carried on here.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Ariel Dougherty Papers, 1946-1993, Interviews by Barbara Halpern Martineau, 1974-1975, October 12, 1974; MC 589, folder 12.8.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

Martineau went on to describe the “pandemonium” that prevailed around five o’clock, when women arrived from their day jobs:

Some immediately get to work at the editing table, others screen rushes from the previous week’s shooting and discuss each others (sic.) work...I’m amazed at the rushes brought in by women who, until a few months ago, had never touched a camera or lights, and I’m especially impressed by the atmosphere of constructive criticism. Everywhere strong, original creativity is in evidence. Personal conflicts are dealt with in a supportive way; disagreements are brought into the open and discussed.<sup>54</sup>

Martineau characterized the flurry of work in the evenings as one of “intense, productive action.” This particular visit was during an especially busy time, while WMM wrapped up business from the New York conference, prepared for Los Angeles, and continued the everyday operations of the workshops and production projects:

In one corner, Jean Shaw is having a heated discussion with a woman she’s helping to write a script for the first time; another group is collecting equipment to go out on a shoot. Laurel Seibert is on the phone to Chicago, trying to reach a woman from Kartemquin Films to see if she’ll be at the Feminist Eye conference in Los Angeles next week. Sheila Paige and Ariel Dougherty, the directors of WMM, are discussing last-minute workshop business with Ann Sandys, prior to Ariel’s departure for Los Angeles. Carol Clement is packing posters and tee shirts with the conference logo, which she designed, to go out to L.A.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

Martineau identified a “considerable tension in the air” since the Los Angeles conference was in some ways viewed as a follow-up to the CFFVO, which had been a heavy responsibility for women “already deeply committed to workshop and fundraising activities and anxious to get on with their own filmmaking.”<sup>56</sup>

Between the CFFVO in New York and the Feminist Eye conference in Los Angeles, more than three hundred individuals from over seventy women’s media groups came together, and the networking and collaborative missions of these conferences had several interesting dimensions. In addition to the agendas of workshops, screenings, and social events, several ongoing projects emerged to help the seventy-plus organizations coordinate their activities after the conferences ended. A report compiled in February explained:

The Saturday workshops at the CFFVO revealed many shared needs and concerns: the need for more effective distribution; the need to educate the public about the extent and nature of women’s media organizations as well as about their productions. We also felt a need to continue exchanging ideas and defining the priorities of our audiences and us more clearly. We discovered that we needed each other, and that our experiences were of tremendous benefit to each other.<sup>57</sup>

Practical results of the New York CFFVO that reflected these realizations included ideas to (1) create a women’s media handbook, (2) establish a monthly exchange of videos among various media groups called International Videoletters, (3) determine a fair policy on freelance video work, (4) write an evolving “womanfesto” that would define feminist media and its aims, (5) publish a regular column for news coverage of women’s media organizations in the publication

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Report on the New York Conference of Feminist Film and Video Organizations, ca. February 1975, Women Make Movies Papers.

*Media Report to Women*, and (6) design and sell a timeless emblem of conference-goer solidarity—group t-shirts.<sup>58</sup>

The idea to produce a women's media resource handbook was actually born out of the energetic planning process for the conference in December 1974, and sought to compile information about contemporary women's media groups and facilitate their communications with one another. While there is significant documentation related to the *planning* for this handbook, its actual realization is uncertain. Still, the numerous conversations surrounding the production of this handbook—even if the book itself was never produced—reveal certain tendencies and struggles within the women's movement at this time, in particular, a sense of urgency to document and preserve the immense swell of feminist activity and profusion of groups and collectives.

Six weeks before the CFFVO, an outline for the proposed handbook was circulated by mail to women's media groups all around the United States. The "Handbook Outline" document stated:

The women's media organization handbook, as we now envision it, will trace the evolution of women's media groups, document their role in social and political herstory/history to date, and preview their impact on the form and direction of future media articulations of reality...We realize that there are any number of ways to organize the elements and stages of women's media organizations' perceptions and actions. We welcome criticism and revision.<sup>59</sup>

Organized into three parts, the handbook outline emphasized that the volume would not be merely a compilation of media organization names with mailing addresses (this information

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> "Handbook Outline," December 23, 1974, Women Make Movies Papers.

would actually be located in a series of appendices), but would be “both an analysis and documentation of contemporary history.”<sup>60</sup> Highly ambitious in scope, the handbook was expected to accomplish nothing less than “make women’s media visible to a mass audience” and ensure that this visibility would “increase the power of all women working in media.”<sup>61</sup> A condensed version of the handbook outline demonstrates its aspirations:

Part One would address:

women’s experiences working in established media; the contradictions inherent in feminist participation in commercial productions; the assumptions supporting the content of commercial media; the implications inherent in the way work and function in commercial media production are hierarchically quantified and qualified.

Part Two aimed to:

document the rise of women’s independent media groups as a creative response to the contradictions above; examine the content of women’s media productions generically; examine the ideological nature of non-competitive, non-hierarchical work structures and the interpersonal dynamics of this work structure; review the life histories of representative women’s media groups, tracing their origin, evolution, and changes in priorities.

Part Three would examine:

the “genre” of mid-seventies women’s media organizations and its rise to power within society at large; the role of women’s media as a part/parcel/tool of the women’s movement; the struggle for financial support, greater public exposure,

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> “A Book About Feminist Media Organizations,” March 25, 1975, Women Make Movies Papers.

effective channels for distribution, and access to broadcast and cable television; community use of women's media production, how communities can document the events of their history, ideas for screenings and discussions around important topics; women's media as an educational, reportorial, consciousness-raising tool.<sup>62</sup>

At the New York conference in February a committee formed to continue work on the handbook, which would explore "working structures and philosophies of women's media organizations," "the distribution, showing, use, and discussion of women-made media," and topical articles proposed by various participating groups.<sup>63</sup> For example, the Women's Film Co-op in Northampton, MA, proposed an article on the importance of women controlling the development of cable television; Videopolis in Chicago suggested a discussion of video distribution and how to reach audiences with particular topics; and the Ann Arbor Women's Video Workshop proposed an exploration of collective, creative decision-making.<sup>64</sup> And at the Feminist Eye Conference that was held in L.A. after the New York conference, detailed surveys were distributed to help shape the handbook in progress.

A concern with facilitating inter-group communication was not unique to the CFFVO, nor was it a goal only of feminists working in media. Numerous forms of coalition building evolved during second wave feminism, seeming to demonstrate that the movement was always self-reflective and self-conscious about its ability to successfully coordinate large-scale efforts for social change with multiple factions of diverse women with varying investments in feminist

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<sup>62</sup> "Handbook Outline," December 23, 1974, Women Make Movies Papers.

<sup>63</sup> "A Book About Feminist Media Organizations," March 25, 1975, Women Make Movies Papers.

<sup>64</sup> "Handbook Outline," December 23, 1974, Women Make Movies Papers.

ideology.<sup>65</sup> Organized by Brenda Feigen Fasteau and Gloria Steinem, the Women's Action Alliance (WAA), for example, came together in 1971 to help the plethora of small feminist groups forming all around the U.S. to learn about what other feminists were doing in their own communities.<sup>66</sup>

Feminist coalitions, as Stephanie Gilmore describes, “were imperfect and tenuous; most did not last very long, and some did not achieve their goals.”<sup>67</sup> And yet, by simply trying to exist, they attempted the difficult and complex task of incorporating many experiences and perspectives into feminist activism and enacting the tenets of intersectionality. Historian Estelle Freedman claims that, in fact, part of why grassroots feminism sustained itself in the face of opposition was that coalitions faced “common oppression” and learned “to trust across difference.”<sup>68</sup> In some ways the CFFVO was the very embodiment of these principles: a face-to-face gathering of women from different parts of the country and different backgrounds, with different resources, timelines, and goals. Nevertheless, they assembled to strategize for one broad ideological mission that they did share in common—rejecting dominant, sexist media and power structures (through professional jobs from “the inside” or, for the most part, alternative means), and creating and showing feminist, women-made media.

Many handbooks and sourcebooks aimed at women's movement groups and activists published directories of women's organizations that were involved in health, education, domestic violence, and other specific areas of feminist work. Titles such as *The New Woman's Survival Sourcebook* (1975), whose cover was illustrated by Judy Chicago, *Introduction to the Women's*

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<sup>65</sup> See the anthology: Stephanie Gilmore, ed., *Feminist Coalitions: Historical Perspectives on Second-wave Feminism in the United States* (University of Illinois Press, 2008).

<sup>66</sup> See Cynthia Harrison, “Building a National Feminist Agenda: Coalition Building in the 1970s,” in Gilmore, 19-46.

<sup>67</sup> Gilmore, 3.

<sup>68</sup> Estelle Freedman, quoted in Gilmore, 2.

*Movement* (1973) and *The Practical Guide to the Women's Movement* (1975), both published by the WAA, proliferated in the mid-1970s.<sup>69</sup> A specialized sourcebook called *Women's Movement Media: A Source Guide*, compiled by Cynthia Harrison and published in 1975, listed and described more than five hundred established organizations and smaller groups that supplied books, periodicals, films, tapes, records, services, and information about and for women. WMM's listing, located in the non-print media section of the book, stated:

A nonprofit, educational, tax-exempt corporation which administers Chelsea Picture Station, a neighborhood media workshop. Teaches professional film, video, and radio skills to those who would not ordinarily receive such training. Aims to present a wide national audience with a new image about the real lives of women, through films like those listed below.<sup>70</sup>

It is certainly possible that the printing of Harrison's book in 1975 compelled the CFFVO handbook committee to shut down their similar project, or that the handbook committee simply could not raise the funds to publish the materials they had worked hard to gather in the first place. It is also possible, I think, that the CFFVO's handbook never came to fruition because of the already tightly limited resources for feminist media, the difficulties feminist filmmakers faced trying to survive as working filmmakers, and the potential frictions among many small groups pursuing similar projects. Envisioning numerous feminist media groups in different parts of the country cooperating extensively to produce a handbook that would document and analyze contemporary history, transform the visibility of women's media for a mass audience, and attempt the many other ambitious goals outlined above, was, perhaps, just that—an ambitious

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<sup>69</sup> See Kirsten Grimstad and Susan Rennie, *The New Woman's Survival Sourcebook* (Knopf, 1975); Women's Action Alliance, *Introduction to the Women's Movement* (The Alliance, 1973); and Deena Peterson, *A Practical Guide to the Women's Movement* (Women's Action Alliance, 1975).

<sup>70</sup> Cynthia Ellen Harrison, *Women's Movement Media: A Source Guide* (Bowker, 1975), 40.



vision without concrete form. Plenty of utopian, even revolutionary feminist visions were conceived and documented throughout the 1970s, and not all of them were actualized. But the CFFVO handbook is a revealing case, because plans for it are incredibly well-documented and it signals tacitly a point of tension among feminist media groups.

## 2.2 FEMINIST COALITIONS IN THE 1970S

A largely unspoken contradiction underlying the central premise of the CFFVO was that, while there was a widespread perception that sharing ideas, strategies, and resources, networking, and collaborating at essentially every level of feminist production and consumption would benefit the participating groups, 1970s feminist media groups were, in fact, often in competition with one another for survival—an uncomfortable irony given that their ideology regarded competition as complicit with patriarchy and capitalism. The handful of groups that survives today, WMM among them of course, testifies to the persistent and longstanding struggle women filmmakers face in a sphere of cultural production that remains almost completely drenched in sexism and prejudice.<sup>71</sup> Iris Films and New Day Films, for example, were both founded in the 1970s by feminist filmmakers. They still survive, New Day as a broader social justice media distributor and Iris as a production company. Virtually all of the other groups that attended the CFFVO have folded over the years for various reasons.

It is not clear whether a perception of inter-group competition was on the minds of conference attendees and thus a metaphorical elephant in the CFFVO “room,” understood as a

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<sup>71</sup> See Martha Lauzen’s eye-opening studies of women in contemporary filmmaking: Martha Lauzen, “The Celluloid Ceiling: Behind-the-Scenes Employment of Women on the Top 250 Films of 2009,” *Center for the Study of Women In Television and Film*, <http://womenintvfilm.sdsu.edu/research.html>.

reality that feminist media groups could not accept, or viewed as a possibility that required little attention. At least one Feminist Eye conference participant from the Bay Area Women's Media Group unleashed her unease and frustration with what she perceived as the inherent competition among feminist filmmakers, and between filmmakers and distributors. In a letter to Laurel Seibert at WMM that was part poetry, part stream-of-consciousness rant, Sharon L. Hess ("Shessa") offered a discouraging analysis of a feminist filmmaker's financial, logistical, associational, and emotional obstacles in the mid-seventies; this illuminating piece merits quoting at length:

We've been at this film on abortion for one and a half years and someone came along with video and finished off the same idea before we did in six months...now we're doin' a film on women artists so, please, don't anyone steal our idea!! Hard time competition blues in our eyes' film of our meeting each other media woman from across the state, the empire.

We agree the "better way" is women getting it together with each other in all respects, thus minimizing the friction of competition among us. But, oh, the big talk of women's media distribution companies, community equipment and info pooling centers...some pittance apprenticeships, even tinsel-wrapped grants (token pacification crumbs), a women's film-slides archive to be used for cataloging and distributing what score of films, tapes, etc. to what? To what?

Where are the majority of women's films and videos shown? In patronizing phallic-worship centers, churches, schools, libraries, scattered women's centers, smothering-small coffee-houses, YWCAs where the \$1 contributions may begin to help pay the artsie-craftsie-hobbiests' gas expenses.

Most of us subsist on beans, coffee, and cigarettes so we can save the gold to buy silver speckled tapeworms.

After distributors' (even feminist distributors) pocketing 50% of the rental money earned, they give the woman whose blood and guts made the film enough to pay for the copy prints she has given them, maybe eventually another \$500 in three or four months. That and unemployment handouts don't mean basic survival let alone enough money for her next film. If that isn't competition between distributor and filmmaker for survival, correct me, what is?

...With the myth among feminist media-makers that as long as our cooperation and media content is feminist-separatist, we will be free of competition with the male market, I must disagree.<sup>72</sup>

The letter speaks for itself, but there are a few salient points worth underscoring. Hess essentially condemned a myth about what was celebrated as “the better way” for feminist filmmakers to operate—by coordinating their efforts—and pointed to the frictions inherent in production (e.g., trying to make the film on abortion), distribution (filmmaker vs. distributor struggle for survival), and exhibition (\$1 contributions from other women at “smothering-small coffee-houses”). She dispelled the idealized vision that feminist media cooperation would eliminate competition—with one another and with the “male market.” She also alluded to disrespect among some feminists and feminist groups and the potential exploitation of skills and talents without proper remuneration. But Hess also pointed to a basic problem faced by women who tried to live as working filmmakers: feminist film distribution was, at the time, a very limited enterprise, and even distributors that existed barely had enough funds “for survival”

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<sup>72</sup> Sharon L. Hess, Letter to Laurel Seibert, April 1975, Women Make Movies Papers.

themselves.<sup>73</sup> The sheer frustration of survival as filmmakers outside of Hollywood in a country where there was so little financial support for working artists (compared to Germany or other European countries, where there were state-sponsored artist grants) echoed throughout the domain of independent and avant-garde filmmakers in the U.S.

Still, the desire for continued collaboration beyond the borders of the New York conference weekend was a recurring topic of discussion. In addition to the handbook proposal, an “International Videoletters” program was established to facilitate regular exchanges among thirteen different women’s media groups in nine cities (though there were no cities outside the U.S. involved in its initial exchanges), and the program seemed to continue for a couple of years. The participating groups included Kartemquin in Chicago; Feminist Studio Workshop and LA Feminist Access Project in LA; Open Video, Video Commune, Women’s Interart Center, and Women Make Movies in New York City; Eileen Griffith in San Diego; Just US Video Collective in San Francisco; Santa Cruz Media Collective; Rochester Women’s Video Collective; Tuscon Feminist Video Collective; Spectra Feminist Media Project in D.C.; and Amazon Palace, Ariel Dougherty and Carol Clement’s project in upstate New York.<sup>74</sup>

International Videoletters was planned as a monthly exchange of videotapes made by feminist video groups around the United States. The intention was to “produce a loose format of exchange of news/information among feminists throughout the world” without going through the drawn out process of editing ½-inch video, which slowed down production and consequently, public exhibition.<sup>75</sup> The compilation and circulation of the Videoletters were described in a

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<sup>73</sup> Organizations like *Creative Film Society* in Reseda, CA, *Impact Films* in New York, NY, *New Day Films* in Franklin Lakes, NJ, *New Line Cinema* in New York, NY, and *Women’s Film Coop* in Northampton, MA distributed feminist media, either exclusively or among a broader collection of circulating titles.

<sup>74</sup> Ariel Dougherty Papers, 1946-1993, International Videoletters; MC 589, folder 17.9.

<sup>75</sup> International Videoletters Resolution, ca. February 1975, Women Make Movies Papers.

four-step process. The first, creative step involved producing the tapes themselves: groups in each of the participating cities created a thirty-minute video on any issue, event, subject, or person, which would involve “the personal, the political, the cultural and/or the aesthetic.”<sup>76</sup> Step two involved duplicating the group’s tape and mailing copies to groups in other cities by a certain time each month. The participating groups then set up screenings for women in their communities as the third step in the Videoletters process, and emphasized consistent screening times and locations in order to build a regular audience. Following each screening, the audience discussed their reactions to the various tapes, the issues presented in them, and any pertinent connections or debates. These post-screening conversations and the audience feedback were recorded and would then become the beginning of a new round of tapes sent off to the other cities and restarted step one.<sup>77</sup>

The chain letter-like tapes profiled individuals, groups, and social issues, and made use of video’s advantages over film—specifically, video’s ability to easily facilitate rerecording and compilation. The International Videoletters political project was fairly explicit, aiming to increase awareness about feminist issues (CR) as well as share news and event information related to women’s media throughout the country (documentation). Videoletters also sought to develop feelings of closeness and collaboration among variously located women’s groups, encourage the growth and participation of interested audiences, and preserve and record women’s media history.<sup>78</sup> While a number of feminist media groups still used 16mm film for their own productions, the comparatively low-cost to make and ship videos around the U.S. was useful for an experimental project such as this.

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Lucas Hilderbrand, *Inherent Vice: Bootleg Histories of Video and Copyright* (Duke University Press, 2009), 205.

<sup>78</sup> Kirsten Grimstad and Susan Rennie, *The New Woman’s Survival Sourcebook* (New York: Knopf, 1975), 171.

Unfortunately, there are minimal records discussing these Videoletters, and they have become a fairly obscure piece of alternative media history. Even so, a brief 1976 article in the feminist periodical *off our backs* reported on the Videoletters project and summarized some of the tapes that circulated in early 1976, and a more recent essay by Melinda Barlow references the international project.

The *off our backs* article described the Videoletters as having the sense of “a women’s TV news and variety show.”<sup>79</sup> It also described one of the videos from San Francisco about Stepping Out, a feminist dance collective, and one from Los Angeles that filmed “extremely well done” interviews with black women who worked in non-traditional jobs and did not identify as feminists, and interviews with Latin American women working in an alcoholic counseling center for women.<sup>80</sup> The WMM contribution was interesting: it was a tape edited at WMM, but made by women at the Bedford Hills Women’s Correctional Facility of themselves. The taped skits were described as “tremendous” and included a court scene that showed a woman “unmercifully railroaded into being convicted,” and a welfare office scene that used humor to show how “degrading it can be for a woman to apply for welfare.”<sup>81</sup> The author of the article, Margie Crow, also observed that there was noticeably no direct criticism of the prison itself in the Videoletter. Ariel Dougherty had pioneered a video program at the Bedford Hills facility, a venture that WMM perhaps thought would be an interesting inspiration to their Videoletter partners.

Barlow’s research into the history of the New York Women’s Video Festival mentions Videoletters screenings at the Women’s Interart Center in New York. Her essay describes the

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<sup>79</sup> Margie Crow, “Keeping an Eye on Women,” in *off our backs* 6.11 (1976): 22.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

Videoletters as allowing “women to see what issues and events were motivating feminist struggles elsewhere.”<sup>82</sup> Her research reveals that the content of other Videoletters included “a demonstration by radical feminist protesting a local TV station in California that had run programs on dieting; a witch who fought against the Supreme Court in order to practice her religion; and Yvonne Wanrow, a Washington state woman on trial for killing a man accused of being a child molester.”<sup>83</sup>

While the Videoletters venture could be seen as a project for enhancing “internal” communications among the like-minded feminist media groups around the U.S. that participated in the CFFVO, the beginning of a large-scale partnership between the CFFVO groups and the publication *Media Report to Women* indicates that feminist media groups were also constantly (and strategically) seeking new audiences and potential collaborators in various kinds of media networks. *Media Report to Women* is a newsletter that was founded in 1972 to address how advertising, print and television journalism, and films and television depict the lives of women; it also covers statistics and professional information related to women working in industries like television broadcasting and journalism. Over the years, films from and information about WMM have appeared in the report’s pages.

Correspondence between WMM and Dr. Donna Allen, Editor at *Media Report to Women* reveals a kind of political alliance between the two. Allen was a pioneering media activist that worked to reveal media systems’ gender and racial biases and campaigned for a more democratic, independent media system. After becoming frustrated by the challenges faced by peace and women’s movements in expressing their interests in mainstream communications

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<sup>82</sup> Melinda Barlow, “Feminism 101: The New York Women’s Video Festival, 1972-1980,” *Camera Obscura* 54 Vol. 18, No. 3 (2003): 19.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid*, 35.

outlets, she founded the Women's Institute for Freedom of the Press (WIFP) in 1972 and edited *Media Report to Women* from 1972 to 1987.<sup>84</sup>

Laurel Seibert wrote to Allen on behalf of WMM and the CFFVO to explain, "one of the unresolved needs [expressed at the conference]...concerned regular news coverage of groups' activities and productions."<sup>85</sup> Seibert's letter described a dialogue that occurred during the conference over the merits of starting a nation-wide feminist film and video organizations newsletter or trying to work with an established publication that might agree to print such news.

While the CCFVO participants (mostly independent film and video makers) and *Media Report to Women's* readers (mostly women working in journalism, broadcasting, or other "mainstream" media outlets) were two different populations of women, Allen and Seibert realized that *Media Report* and CFFVO/WMM's goals were essentially the same. The main aims of a partnership were broadening the audiences for work women were already doing in diverse media forms, enhancing communication among women in various media settings, and sharing news and event information via a large-scale, national network of media practitioners and readers. Allen's response to Seibert detailed the advantages and limitations she saw for such a partnership:

The *Media Report* reaches a very broad audience from 'radical' feminist to very 'straight' media women and includes many libraries, which reach women who are not part of the movement. About 70% of our subscribers are media women, who in turn are able to reach thousands more through their media with the information they find in *Media Report*. Many tell me they do this now. For some, this is the

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<sup>84</sup> Susan Ware and Stacy Lorraine Braukman, eds., *Notable American Women: A Biographical Dictionary Completing the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 20.

<sup>85</sup> Laurel Seibert, Letter to Donna Allen, February 20, 1975, Women Make Movies Papers.



only contact they have with the movement. Another advantage is that the *Media Report* never attacks anyone or passes judgment on anyone's work...Limitations: We already have 2-3 times as much material as we have space to print, and although video and film is an important area to which we can give much more space than we do even now, there will never be enough to do justice to your subject...Much writing would be in the area of speculation, opinion, and proposals, to judge by the average paper, and no doubt the same substance could be said in far fewer words...Being forced to condense might tighten the logic as well as the space.<sup>86</sup>

According to Allen and Seibert's correspondence, the two agreed that the *Media Report* would commit to printing the equivalent of 1½ pages per monthly issue on news and information contributed by feminist film and video organizations. However, one notable feature of the *Media Report* was that the news from different media sectors (television, print, etc.) was spread throughout each monthly issue rather than being compartmentalized into individual sections.

Allen explained this editorial logic to Seibert, since the feminist film and video group news would be similarly dispersed throughout each issue instead of printed on its own page: "Since *Media Report* is a cross-fertilizer, I try to avoid a 'television' page, a 'print media' page, 'Canadian news' and other such specialty areas. I want women of one media to see the problems and interests of women in other media (and see how similar they all are!) rather than to skip over whole pages because they are for 'other' women."<sup>87</sup>

Two important outcomes of the CFFVO that took the form of written statements were the establishment of a policy on freelance work and an ongoing mission statement for feminist

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<sup>86</sup> Donna Allen, Letter to Laurel Seibert, February 23, 1975, Women Make Movies Papers.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

media. The simple but invaluable purpose at the core of the policy on freelance work was to “encourage use and discourage abuse of film and video groups on freelance jobs.”<sup>88</sup> Seeking out freelance film and video production projects from businesses, collectives, and other groups was seen as a relatively easy way for feminist film groups to earn extra income—as long as the fees charged and expected timeline were fair and reasonable. The twelve-point policy developed at the CFFVO essentially outlined a host of guidelines that individual feminist media groups could use at their discretion or adapt to particular situations. These “operating considerations” included equipment and maintenance costs for different kinds of film and tape, camera, bulbs, head cleaner, labels, etc.; transportation costs for crew and equipment; the value of people’s time; pre- and post-production labor; and other elements involved in executing a freelance film or video project.<sup>89</sup>

WMM and the participating groups at the CFFVO also developed a “Womanfesto,” which set off a significant and complex process of refocusing within WMM’s central mission as well as its internal organization. This Womanfesto stated:

As feminists working collectively in film and video we see our media as an ongoing process both in terms of the way it is made and the way it’s distributed and shown. We are committed to feminist control of that entire process. We do not accept the existing power structure and we are committed to changing it by the content and structure of our images and by the ways we relate to each other in our work and with our audience. Making and showing our work is an ongoing cyclical process, and we are responsible for changing and developing our approaches as we learn from this experience. We see ourselves as part of the

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<sup>88</sup> “Policy on Freelance Work,” ca. February 1975, Women Make Movies Papers.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

larger movement of women dedicated to changing society by struggling against oppression as it manifests itself in sexism, heterosexism, classism, racism, ageism, and imperialism. Questioning and deepening our understanding of words and how language itself can be oppressive is part of the ongoing struggle. Within this struggle we want to affirm and share the positive aspects of our experience as women in celebration.<sup>90</sup>

Embedded in the language of this mission statement was an important ideological shift for WMM's central project.

Although WMM's activities from 1969—1974 enacted feminist concerns and politics, its primary drive was local outreach rooted in a specific working class, ethnically diverse community and serving as a media education and resource center for that community. The Womanfesto's explicit emphasis on sexism and a shared struggle for feminist control may have reflected what WMM was practicing already, but concretized it in language in a way that had not really been done before. Accordingly, the activities and documents around the 1975 conferences suggest an important juncture for WMM's explicit and broader political orientation. Moreover, the CFFVO attained a particularly interesting sense of political depth through its visual representation or "branding." Specifically, via a conference logo design that appeared prominently in correspondence related to the two conferences in New York and Los Angeles and in the posters and printed programs, the conference organizers aligned themselves with the thrusts of contemporaneous anti-Establishment, progressive party politics.

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<sup>90</sup> "Conference of Feminist Film and Video Organizations: An Ongoing Manifesto," ca. February 1975, Women Make Movies Papers.

The centerpiece of the logo design is a recognizable outline of a Bolex-like handheld motion picture camera, depicted in profile and shaded solidly in black.<sup>91</sup> The camera is mounted on a support, which is held at the bottom by a firm, determined fist. An arc of text above the camera says “feminist film & video conferences,” while the arc below the camera reads “’75 new york los angeles.”<sup>92</sup> Significantly, the illustration of the camera appears slightly exaggerated, in order to appropriate a widely known hammer and sickle-like symbol to the realm of certain kinds of vanguard film production and underscore a commitment to Marxist politics. The overall shape and impression of this conference logo and the signifying power of particular political iconography—the hammer and sickle and fist—recall a panorama of images that invoke a history of social struggles and notions of collectivity and solidarity.

### **2.3 “JUST A MOOD”? THE POLITICS OF FEMINIST ORGANIZING**

The conclusion of the New York and Los Angeles conferences set off waves of eager planning and organizing among the participating feminist media groups and further entrenched the groups in intense political discourses. At the end of March 1975, Margie Adam (the feminist folk singer who had performed at the New York conference) invited several WMM members to have a documented conversation about “politics, culture, and the women’s movement.”<sup>93</sup> The oral histories from this moment after the CFFVO and Feminist Eye in 1975 render a complex

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<sup>91</sup> The conference program attributed the graphics to Carol Clement, a feminist artist and activist closely involved with WMM for many years and Dougherty’s partner at the time of the CFFVO.

<sup>92</sup> Conference of Feminist Film and Video Organizations Program, February 1-2, 1975, Women Make Movies Papers.

<sup>93</sup> Politics, Culture, and the Women’s Movement, Transcribed Conversation, March 30, 1975, Women Make Movies Papers.

image—not necessarily of political crisis, but of momentum and nascent friction. This energy derived from a sense that earlier divisions within the women’s movement, within a socialist movement, and between the two were unproductive. These divisions were to be abandoned, perhaps, in favor of a more inclusive and synthetic approach to feminist political organizing.

The discussion initiated by Adam and transcribed by Seibert began with an analysis of “splits” or factions in the women’s movement, particularly in relation to the assumptions about socialist feminists versus traditional Marxists. While it is somewhat confusing and difficult to follow, this discussion about the “problem” of distinct affiliations emerged as a kind of springboard topic in the dialogue, and provides really interesting primary documentation about how those who were active in the women’s movement were thinking about political movements and tensions within them. WMM documentary filmmaker Cathy Zheutlin stated, “One trend I’m aware of is the problem of a distinction between people who call themselves socialists and feminists. Socialists...classic Marxist analysis with sexism as an important issue; Feminists...with the patriarchy as the first issue.”<sup>94</sup> Zheutlin seemed to want to underscore the fact that there were two separate camps working toward the same goals, not that there was necessarily a conflict between the two groups.<sup>95</sup> Charlotte Bunch responded, “It appears to me that there is a new politics of a feminist movement dealing with classically socialist ideas, better than either the old socialist or old feminist rhetoric...a [recognition] of common issues and common places...in *Quest* [the feminist journal Bunch founded] and CLUW [Coalition of Labor Union Women].”<sup>96</sup> As Chris Weedon argues in her book on the history of the concept of difference in feminism, the centerpiece of second wave socialist feminism in the 1970s was “the

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<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

desire to hold together class and gender as social factors which constitute difference in oppressive ways.”<sup>97</sup>

Bunch occupied a unique and important position in the women’s movement, throughout its history but particularly in the mid-1970s. From 1969—1977, Bunch was a fellow at the leftist think tank the Institute for Policy Studies, an influential institution in the women’s movement, and therefore was geographically located at the epicenter of lesbian feminist activism in Washington, D.C. When the women’s movement was “convulsed” by a “gay/straight split” that Bunch discussed elsewhere in the dialogue cited above, she experienced it closely in D.C.<sup>98</sup> Carol Clement’s response to Bunch suggested her interpretation of an important distinction: “There’s a split on whether Marxist/lesbian or feminist comes first...different tactics,” assuming that lesbians were automatically Marxists.<sup>99</sup> And Bunch responded:

[The] focus is no longer on why we split. Not that the differences weren’t there, but there is the perception of a need for a new synthesis. All of us have 1) reached a dead-end in a split, not that it wasn’t healthy and needed at the time, but we’ve done it, and 2) recognized that even if there are differences, both segments have learned from following out their different projects [*sic*]. It’s hard to find an articulated expression of this; it’s now just a mood.<sup>100</sup>

Veering toward the subject of audiences for particular causes and assumptions about them, a comradely debate became visible among these feminist activists representing diverse experiences with feminism and political locations. Although Bunch had suggested there was a present

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<sup>97</sup> Chris Weedon, *Feminism, Theory, and the Politics of Difference* (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 1999), 18.

<sup>98</sup> See Chapter 5 in Alice Echols, *Daring to be Bad: Radical Feminism in America, 1967-1975* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota Press, 1989).

<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

“mood” implying a new level of engagement among different groups working for social change, Dougherty observed, “Some people who are working for Chile don’t see the feminist community as a source of work and support.”<sup>101</sup> And Adam, who had initiated the conversation because she had witnessed numerous dynamics within the women’s movement as a traveling musician and wanted to reflect on trends she noticed, added:

I was wondering about the homogeneity of my audiences, and talked to my producers about it. They were only advertising in gay bars, women’s centers, places where 18-35 year old white, middle class lesbians gather. What about women who don’t go to those places? We’re talking to ourselves. The theory of including all sorts of women, internationally, that I read about in *Sister* and *Quest* [feminist journals], I don’t see in practice. *Big Mama Rag* [a Denver-based feminist news periodical] criticizes me for not having enough working class lyrics in my songs, but who comprises the staff of the paper, and who is its audience?<sup>102</sup>

This dialogue, which was held after the two major conferences concluded, similar to the position papers that were sent to the CFFVO in advance, reflected a keen and critical awareness about feminism’s attentive maneuvering through issues of class and racial difference. And Dougherty seemed grateful to have an exceptional scholar, leader, and activist working closely with feminist media; in April 1975 she stated:

I’m very impressed with Charlotte...I think [she is] a real figure in all of this, such a relief. Charlotte is integral in putting links together in the women’s movement. I think she got a strong sense of WMM’s role of teaching working class people, practice into action...that Jean Shaw should play an active role in

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<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

the NY conference. It's nice to hear it affirmed in Los Angeles. Conference energies change our own heads about where we're at.<sup>103</sup>

A somewhat ambiguous notion of WMM's distinctiveness is a theme that emerged and re-emerged throughout the CFFVO and in its follow-up conversations, activities, and projects. On the subject of audiences and inclusion, Dougherty shared that one thing she liked about WMM was "our daily contact with the neighborhood, which is certainly not lesbian/feminist America."<sup>104</sup> And on the subject of finances and how feminist organizations struggled to survive economically, Dougherty added, "One of the things about money in WMM is that if we charged the neighborhood people a lot of them wouldn't be able to come. But there's a deal, too, about showing the films in the community after they're finished."<sup>105</sup> Another women's liberation activist and lesbian photographer, Joan Biren (JEB), commented that "WMM is a model for more people than you recognize."<sup>106</sup>

In addition to energizing discussion among the participating feminist media groups, the CFFVO was also a catalyst for structural changes within WMM. Dougherty explained in an interview, "the climate had always been there [to restructure WMM], but we had never bothered to take the time."<sup>107</sup> The WMM staff spent a long time discussing possibilities for change, but could not come to any agreement. "We found ourselves completely overextended as an organization—a real dilemma of women in general and of the movement in particular,"

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<sup>103</sup> Ariel Dougherty, Second half of post-conference discussion, April 1, 1975, Women Make Movies Papers.

<sup>104</sup> "Politics, Culture, and the Women's Movement," Transcribed Conversation, March 30, 1975, Women Make Movies Papers.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid.

<sup>106</sup> Joan E. Biren, Second half of post-conference discussion, April 1, 1975, Women Make Movies Papers, Women Make Movies, New York, NY; Biren was a founding member of the pivotal lesbian group the *Furies* and a close friend of Bunch's in Washington D.C..

<sup>107</sup> Ariel Dougherty, Jean Shaw, and Susan Eenigenburg, interview by Charlotte Bunch in *Quest* 3, no. 2 (1976): 44.



Dougherty explained.<sup>108</sup> But the structural/organizational struggles faced by WMM members in mid-1975 were inextricably tied to a difficult interpersonal situation that had developed between Dougherty and her WMM co-founder and co-director Sheila Paige: “Sheila and I especially were caught in a bind, still loving WMM, but not having time enough to work on something, after all the day-to-day chores, that was really satisfying. We’d started an organization to make movies, and the end result was that *we* had no time to make them.”<sup>109</sup>

An unfortunate and debilitating personal conflict developed between Dougherty and Paige to the point that they “stopped talking at all.”<sup>110</sup> Exhausted by their ongoing teaching responsibilities, overworked and underpaid for running their own organization, unable to keep up with WMM’s growth with proper fundraising, and frustrated by the lack of time and resources to pursue their own creative film projects, the WMM co-founders realized that they needed to agree to significant organizational changes in order for WMM to continue operating. Dougherty sought guidance from Judy Freespirit, a founder of the Radical Feminist Therapy Collective in Los Angeles, to help her and Paige navigate their “tremendous personal conflict.”<sup>111</sup> Through several mediation sessions and many talks during the summer of 1975, the two agreed to take separate leaves of absence from WMM and to invite anyone involved with the organization to participate in large-scale strategic planning and restructuring sessions, as ways to begin alleviating the burden of leadership, decision-making, fundraising, and future planning responsibilities from Dougherty and Paige.

This first set of restructuring conversations was not easy: the six weeks of summer meetings were painful emotional experiences for those involved. Dougherty wrote that these

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<sup>108</sup> Ibid.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid, 45.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid.

conversations among with Paige, Jane Warrenbrand, Laurel Seibert, Denise Bostrom, and Anne Sandys “left in all of us a tremendous amount of scars.”<sup>112</sup> She reflected, “The pain in giving things up and not giving things up has brought out a lot of fear and hostility, and old wounds, especially between Sheila and me. So now, not as a collective, but as six individuals, we are retreating, largely to pursue our own personal projects and some necessary and important personal growth.”<sup>113</sup>

The agreement between Dougherty and Paige stated that they would dissolve their partnership and transfer their co-directorship of WMM to a new governing body, which was to be chosen at another set of reorganization meetings in October 1975.<sup>114</sup> It also stated that Paige would take a leave of absence from WMM from October 1975 through May 1976, at which time Dougherty would take a leave of absence until January 1, 1977. The problems that Dougherty and Paige had with each other and with WMM were not resolved merely by agreeing to take a break, however; they were very much related to the way their positions within WMM’s structure had developed. In short, a significant restructuring of the organization and a greater distribution of labor and responsibilities appeared to be essential to WMM’s survival. Not coincidentally, newer, collaborative approaches to production at WMM were already underway. While the original filmmaking workshop was “very much oriented toward the individual” and “personalized” films, by 1975 the participating members moved on to working together on “more group oriented productions” and sharing the responsibilities and problems.<sup>115</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> Ariel Dougherty Papers, 1946-1993, Statement by Dougherty, June, 1975; MC 589, folder 12.4.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid.

<sup>114</sup> Agreement between Sheila Paige and Ariel Dougherty, ca. September 1975, Women Make Movies Papers.

<sup>115</sup> Ariel Dougherty Papers, 1946-1993, Interview by Barbara Halpern Martineau, October 12, 1974; MC 589, folder 12.8.

Both Dougherty and Paige wrote brief letters to their WMM friends and associates before the October meetings to communicate information about their contract and provide some explanation about the conflict. Dougherty elucidated what she called the “structural flaw” that eventually led to the two women’s disintegrating relationship, and her reflective letter to WMM warrants quoting at length:

Sheila [Paige] and I have worked together for six years. We have completed four films...have dreamed up innumerable projects which have never been realized, and designed and run a whole organization which has effected ten lives, twenty-five lives, four hundred lives, thousands of lives. On so many levels the work has been so good—helping women to tell stories in film, sharing those stories with women across American, building networks and comparing lives with our sisters in other countries. But the work came to rule us, or at least, it did me.<sup>116</sup>

Dougherty continued to explain that the serious structural flaw in designing WMM was “for us [she and Paige] to never have peers, for us never to be students, never to be learning how to make a movie...The structural flaw in insulating Sheila’s and my roles only serves to accentuate the roles which we have all played upon entering WMM.”<sup>117</sup> Although, Dougherty conceded, the concept of “roles “in an organization was not necessarily a bad thing, “when the role overcomes the person and it is role to role that we relate with one another, then something is seriously wrong...The match that Sheila and I played as Co-Directors...worked well only as long as we never explored what we might really want to do as individuals, i.e. out of those roles.”<sup>118</sup>

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<sup>116</sup> Ariel Dougherty, Open letter to WMM, September 16, 1975, Women Make Movies Papers.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid.

To ensure that their former roles were not expected to resume after their leaves of absence, Dougherty and Paige made certain that their contract was clear that in no way should they “have to fulfill the same and or equal responsibilities within WMM upon [returning].”<sup>119</sup> Paige’s letter to WMM friends expressed a sense of confidence in the contract and its explicitness. She wrote:

Of all the means toward alleviating the tensions between us and providing for WMM to change in a good way, this contract seems best. It provides flexibility in Ariel’s and my relationship and affords undivided energy for WMM restructuring. To me, further, the contract exemplifies a very healthy new explicitness in its definition of roles and responsibilities. In the future, perhaps contracts will become useful as tools for organizing work at WMM in general.<sup>120</sup>

In addition to the letters that both women wrote to WMM, Dougherty also explained that she found the process of “writing-thinking” to be a good way to “clear heads” and get to “new levels of thinking.”<sup>121</sup> In this vein, she authored a broadsheet to share her thought processes, which was posted at the WMM workshop; it outlined what her involvement would be until October and invited anyone to “add, react, criticize, praise” it so that it might become a kind of log or WMM diary.<sup>122</sup>

In advance of the October reorganization retreat, Bostrum, Dougherty, Sandys, and Warrenbrand sent out a letter to WMM members asking them to think seriously about what WMM could be and what they wanted out of WMM. They also emphasized: “it is impossible that any one organization can meet *all* of our needs—thus the sessions are intended to plan out

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<sup>119</sup> Ibid.

<sup>120</sup> Sheila Paige, Open letter to WMM, October 3, 1975, Women Make Movies Papers.

<sup>121</sup> Ariel Dougherty Papers, 1946-1993, Ariel’s Broadsheet, June 13, 1975; MC 589, folder 12.4.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid.

what the needs are that the organization can realistically satisfy. This also means recognizing what needs and things WMM cannot do. We will pinpoint the things we can do.”<sup>123</sup> With an encouraging, sincere, and hopeful tone, the writers of the letter reached out to anyone involved with WMM to solicit their input and participation in the October retreat:

We honestly want women who have positive and constructive visions. We suggest with almost a full month before the weekend meeting that you spend time thinking about, writing down any and all thoughts about what you want WMM to be...these thoughts and suggestions will make up the agenda for the weekend and ...will help people exchange ideas prior to the weekend.<sup>124</sup>

Another interesting point of emphasis in this letter was the statement, “It is becoming increasingly obvious that WMM has to define its priorities more specifically.”<sup>125</sup> And just below this sentence, typed out in all caps and surrounded by parentheses to draw the eye to it on the page, was another statement: “NEEDS ARE WHAT WE WANT: PRIORITIES ARE WHAT WE GET.”<sup>126</sup>

The emphasis placed on this October weekend retreat to reorganize and restructure WMM reflected an awareness of the potential gravity of a leaderless, directionless WMM. Before the retreat, Dougherty wrote up an overview document that listed things WMM had done in the past and things WMM could do in the future.<sup>127</sup> It seems like this was intended as a reference and stimulus for discussion, reminding the retreat participants of WMM’s history and brainstorming possibilities for future directions. It is an illuminating document, not because it

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<sup>123</sup> Letter to WMM women, Septemebr 29, 1975, Women Make Movies Papers.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid.

<sup>127</sup> Dougherty is not identified as the document’s author, but it is reasonable to suppose she wrote it based on the directives added at the end, which suggest her departure from a leadership position.

reveals any new information, but because it reviews concisely the incredible range of projects that WMM executed successfully in its first three years of operation:

Taught film skills; taught video skills; produced films and tapes; fundraised for ongoing support; fundraised for special projects; designed special projects; kept the books; filed annual and semiannual reports; recruited people to the workshop; answered innumerable calls and letters; distributed films; talked with women about how to get involved in filmmaking; set up community screenings; helped women do budgets for films; recommended funding sources; helped organize a national conference; researched women's film groups, spoken at film screenings; designed and written publicity materials; developed advanced film projects; produced and helped broadcast radio dramas; talked with an endless chain of people in attempts to get money; renovated and moved the workshop; attempted to write a handbook; etc.<sup>128</sup>

From October 24-26, 1975, WMM members gathered for restructuring meetings outside of New York City at Camp Bernie in New Jersey. There are records from these meetings but not “official” minutes, so although it is not clear precisely who was present at the October meetings, the records summarize much of what transpired, what kinds of priorities were discussed, and what outcomes and next steps were decided. At the start, Dougherty presented the evolution of WMM from its founding in 1969, to its incorporation in 1972, to its rapid growth through 1975—growth and expansion that occurred faster than the fundraising capabilities, to the eventuality of Dougherty and Paige having too much responsibility. This reflects a pattern common to new non-profit organizations and difficulties around the division of labor in young

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<sup>128</sup> “Things WMM Has Done in the Past,” ca. October 1975, Women Make Movies Papers.

institutions. The reorganizing meetings that were held in the spring of 1975, although unsuccessful, were credited with paving the way for the October meetings.<sup>129</sup>

Signaling an aspiration to produce higher quality films rather than focusing on teaching first-time filmmakers, the women at the meetings expressed “almost unanimously” the desire to learn more specific skills in editing and camera work and to “improve present skills through the use of ‘professional’ resource people, to learn better filmmaking.”<sup>130</sup> Making films—and more specifically, making better films—emerged as a major priority that was very important for many women in a newly structured WMM. Underlying this discussion was a presumed tension between consciousness-raising films (presumed to be lower-quality) and “professional” films (quality films that could be useful for generating income). The original WMM emphasis on teaching, especially instruction for brand new filmmakers and creating first films, was understood as important, but there was “a really strong feeling” to postpone this for a period to prioritize higher quality productions.<sup>131</sup>

Language around these restructuring goals resonates in an interesting way with the utopian sensibilities of the social, political, and cultural climate that allowed WMM (and many other media collectives) to form in the 1960s. The idea then was that if people were given better access to the means of production, they would not only create quality artifacts, but these artifacts would instigate real social change. A realization that WMM had to confront at this moment of transition was that they had in fact created greater access for women, but those films did not circulate perhaps as widely as they wanted, and of course sexism in media still persisted. It still persists today. In order for their films—and therefore, their political commitments—to be seen

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<sup>129</sup> Summary of WMM Meeting, October 25-26, 1975, Women Make Movies Papers.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid.

on a larger scale, WMM modified its founding goal to teach women technical production skills, and shifted its focus to more highly polished productions and distribution that could better fit in, even in a small way, with mainstream commercial media.

A prototype statement of purpose emerged from the October meetings, which declared, “WMM hopes to become a self-sustaining organization which enables varied women to make high quality movies in a caring and supportive environment where the film process is as important as film products.”<sup>132</sup> Several measures were discussed to accomplish these goals. Alongside the call for better WMM filmmaking was a desire to create paid staff positions as well as different kinds of WMM membership, and then to establish clear-cut relationships among WMM’s various constituencies: between WMM staff and WMM membership, WMM staff and film directors, and directors and crews. Although not accomplished at these meetings, it was proposed that bylaws be written up to “ensure power sharing in the staff and membership” and to set up committees that would take on particular tasks within WMM’s new structure. These steps also signaled a step from a highly personal organization to a more formalized institution.

In addition to discussing everyone’s thoughts about WMM’s future priorities and structure, the meetings began to deal with budgeting issues and apportioning approximately \$20,000 from a New York State Council on the Arts (NYSCA) grant. But since that task required a great deal of time and effort, it was decided that after the weekend meetings an interim committee would work on writing up a detailed budget, finalizing the contract with NYSCA, writing up by-laws for the new organizational structure, and finalizing a National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) contract.

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<sup>132</sup> Ibid.



Six staff positions were identified and considered important for enacting the new organization of WMM, and their functions were delineated in the October meeting summary: Office Manager (F/T), funded by NYSCA (\$4,000) and NEA (\$4,000); Fundraiser (F/T seasonal), funded by NYSCA (\$4,000); Publicity (P/T), funded by NYSCA (\$2,000); and, in a decisive institutional act, a Distributor (F/T), with funding to be determined by the interim budget committee.<sup>133</sup> Other components of the drafted budget were distribution expenses (\$2,000), rent and utilities (\$3,500), office supplies (\$500), publicity materials (\$500), maintenance (\$300), and insurance (\$500).<sup>134</sup>

If recognizing the need to establish new and clear responsibilities for WMM staff and members and to create better quality films greatly impacted WMM's general orientation and major projects in the mid-to-late 1970s, then the third major recognition of the October meetings thoroughly reformed WMM's very foundation. Everyone at the meetings agreed that distribution "was very important to the present and future structure of WMM" and that "in order for WMM to become self-supporting, distribution must expand and possibly include non-organization movies by women."<sup>135</sup>

Since expanding and enhancing a more effective distribution program surfaced as a top concern, hiring a full-time salaried distribution coordinator was considered essential. This role would include planning, directing, and doing market research for the rental and sale of films in distribution. In addition, she would communicate with filmmakers, decide who would receive flyers and promotional materials, obtain and contact potential film reviewers, research and create mailing lists, maintain the books, and report to filmmakers semi-annually. The discussions about

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<sup>133</sup> Ibid.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid.

renewed distribution efforts concluded by reflecting on how decisions would be made regarding which films to distribute and how to fund the position, although the group did not come to any conclusions on these specific issues at the meetings.

Emphasizing film distribution and following through with these clear distributor responsibilities would ensure a vital degree of economic stability that WMM had not secured in the past. This commitment, made at the October meetings, signaled an important transformation at WMM, from a community-based film and teaching workshop to an explicitly feminist resource for independent media. This institutional transformation, however, did not occur easily or smoothly.

Although the October 1975 reorganization meetings can be seen as a kind of turning point in the history of WMM, it took nearly another full decade and innumerable re-organizing conversations, meetings, retreats, starts, restarts, and near-collapses before WMM became solidified as the distributor of feminist media we know it as today. In this chapter, I have shown how the politics of WMM in the mid-1970s and the 1975 CFFVO enrich our understanding of feminist media history from the 1970s and of feminist cultural history more broadly. The year 1975 was a pivotal moment for WMM, but so too was the following year, when WMM members produced and completed their own collective documentary film *Healthcaring: From Our End of the Speculum* (1976). The production and distribution of this film, which I attend to in the following chapter, both actualized a desire to produce higher-quality, polished films, and broadened and energized the distribution paradigm at WMM. However, as I discuss in chapter four, this distribution model proved to be unsustainable around the turn of the decade because of complex, and somewhat chaotic organizational obstacles. To address the critical matter of independent film distribution in WMM's history, the next two chapters detail the intricacies

involved in endeavoring to (1) professionalize the organization and distribution program through the film *Healthcaring*, (2) stabilize the practices of distribution in the late 1970 and early 1980s, and (3) prioritize distribution as WMM's central endeavor in the mid-1980s.

### 3.0 CINEMA OF IMMEDIACY

*At the start of the 70s, entered a feminist cinema. In place of the Fathers' bankruptcy of both form and content, there was a new and different energy; a cinema of immediacy and positive force ...there was an entirely new sense of identification—with other women—and a corresponding commitment to communicate with this now-identifiable audience, a commitment which replaced, for feminist filmmakers, the elusive public ignored and frequently scorned by the male formalist filmmakers. Thus, from the start, its link to an evolving political movement gave feminist cinema a power and direction entirely unprecedented in independent filmmaking, bringing issues of theory/practice, aesthetics/meaning, process/representation into sharp focus.<sup>1</sup>*

--B. Ruby Rich

*As a businessman, the doctor had a direct interest in a social role for women that encouraged them to be sick; as a doctor, he had an obligation to find the causes of female complaints. The result was that, as a "scientist," he ended up proposing medical theories that were actually justifications of women's social role.<sup>2</sup>*

--Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English

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<sup>1</sup> R. Ruby Rich, "In the Name of Feminist Film Criticism," in *Issues in Feminist Film Criticism*, ed. Patricia Erens (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1990), 269.

<sup>2</sup> Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English, *Complaints and Disorders: The Sexual Politics of Sickness* (Old Westbury: The Feminist Press, 1973), 26.

In the early 1970s, WMM's Chelsea Picture Station workshops were very much oriented towards individual students executing their ideas for a film. But following the organization's re-orientation meetings in October 1975, WMM's filmmaking instruction shifted to a more group-oriented productions, with several women working and learning through the same film projects. While this model suited WMM's commitment to a collective structure, it also helped develop higher quality productions. In this chapter, I elaborate on the significance of this institutional shift, and the analogous transformations in WMM's distribution program—one that is seen today as the heart of the organization's mission. I also focus on the film that marks a turning point for the organization, called *Healthcaring: From Our End of the Speculum* (1976).

It is unclear precisely when and how WMM first initiated distribution of its own films in the early 1970s, because efforts were somewhat scattered and uneven. This was so partly because there was not enough grant funding to develop a comprehensive distribution and marketing program, partly because co-founders/co-directors Dougherty and Paige were constantly overextended with teaching and keeping the organization running, and partly because WMM's main focus in its earliest years really was on instruction through the workshops. But what is clear is that even WMM's earliest attempts at a distribution program, however minimal its success, was a move that foresaw a crucial component of institutional self-sufficiency. Following the October 1975 meetings, which are discussed earlier, transitioning to distribution as a major priority anticipated mutually beneficial relationships with organizations and institutions that used non-commercial, educational media in their programs.

Prior to 1976, film distribution at WMM was a limited enterprise, both in terms of the actual number of films distributed and the effort and time that the already overextended and

underpaid WMM participants could devote to distribution outreach and marketing. Here, I would like to present an overview of what distribution looked like before *Healthcaring* was made.

Although the workshop's early students produced numerous first films and short films, only a handful of these were actively in circulation between 1970 and 1976 (for example, Jean Shaw's film *Fear* about fending off a rapist, which was a bit more polished than some of the other first workshop films). In addition to distributing some of these workshop films, WMM's earliest distribution efforts included the longer films made by the WMM co-founders: *Sweet Bananas* by Ariel Dougherty, and *The Women's Happy Time Commune* by Sheila Paige, which is now distributed by the New York Filmmakers Cooperative.<sup>3</sup>

While there are no distribution records, per say, prior to 1976, it is clear that at least some efforts were made to distribute the films produced through the Chelsea Picture Station workshops as early as 1973, when WMM was still in its infancy. A WMM brochure that was issued in the spring of 1975 (thus, before the October 1975 restructuring) lists several activities: "Developing First Films in a Community Workshop," "Advanced Productions," "Distribution," "An Information Service," and "International Videoletters: an Experiment." The description of the Distribution program claims that many workshop films were screened at colleges, conferences, festivals, and the like, although there is not necessarily concrete evidence of these screenings:

National distribution of Women Make Movies' productions is a natural progression from the filmmaking...for over two years Women Make Movies has

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<sup>3</sup> It may seem strange that Paige's film is not distributed by the organization she helped create, but when she left the organization in the late 1970s it was not an amicable departure—there were personal conflicts and emotional difficulties and she did not maintain a relationship with the organization over the years.

distributed the short-length movies made in the workshop along with longer independently-made films of the co-founders. The productions have gone to standard 16mm educational film audiences and have been seen by hundreds of thousands of university students, conference-goers, women's groups, festival audiences, and the like.<sup>4</sup>

The same brochure claims that "several thousand dollars" of distribution income helped to "defray" the cost of running the film workshops.<sup>5</sup> In the *Women's Movement Media* sourcebook (which listed works distributed), twelve films were listed for WMM, including Dougherty's thirty-minute film *Sweet Bananas*, which could be rented for \$30 and purchased for \$300, Paige's fifty-minute film *The Women's Happy Time Commune*, which could be rented for \$50 and purchased for \$500, and several of the early workshop films, such as Jean Shaw's seven-minute *Fear* (rental \$12.25, purchase \$70) and Jane Warrenbrand's *Paranoia Blues* (\$8.75 rental, \$50 purchase).<sup>6</sup> And in 1973, the radical feminist journal *off our backs* (founded in 1970) published an article that described how to rent feminist films and stated that, "even the films from WMM's were \$90," remarking on the high cost of 16mm film rentals.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, the article also identified WMM as a source "for women's shorts."<sup>8</sup>

A bit of scrap paper from Dougherty's records also contains a draft of what seems like background information on WMM distribution. Importantly, it draws a distinction between showing films locally (or exhibition), which was a priority when the Chelsea Picture Station

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<sup>4</sup> Ariel Dougherty Papers, 1946-1993, Brochure; MC 589, folder 12.7.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Harrison, 40-41.

<sup>7</sup> Barbara Lubinski, "Doing a Women's Film Festival," *off our backs* 3.12 (November 1973): 10.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

workshops were reaching out to first-time filmmakers, and distribution on a larger targeted scale to sizeable institutions like universities and libraries:

Since the completion of the first set of films in WMM's community-based teaching project in the spring of 1973, WMM has been involved in the business of distributing films. In those first years our primary aim in reaching an audience was directed at our neighborhood, the Chelsea community. Filmmakers were encouraged to make contact with community groups, arrange for screenings and publicity, and with projector in arm go before groups to share their films and the filmmaking process.<sup>9</sup>

The first documentation of wider distribution suggests that in 1973, about \$750 of WMM's operating budget from NYSCA went toward a "poster-like distribution piece," which was mailed to approximately 6,000 libraries, universities, film societies, and schools.<sup>10</sup> This was the most that could be done within the budget constraints, and the burden of organizing teaching film and video workshops. Doing what was necessary to "keep a fledgling non-profit film organization going" clearly took precedence over distribution.<sup>11</sup> Certainly, these materials indicate that there was a strong desire to distribute the workshop and other films, but for several years WMM lacked sufficient infrastructure and support to do so.

In discussing some of the problems faced by women's groups in initiating distribution, Jean Shaw, one of the Chelsea Picture Station's earliest workshop participants and a major contributor to WMM through its restructuring, explained how feminist film *work* and *products*

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<sup>9</sup> Ariel Dougherty Papers, 1946-1993; Brochure; MC 589, folder 13.4.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.



are devalued frequently both in and outside of the feminist community. Her reflections are insightful and worth quoting at length:

The enculturation of capitalism in this society is so strong that we can't escape it. Here we have an organization [WMM] that's involved in the process of film and in the process of people's lives—what *we* see as being the valuable thing—while the system sees the *product* as the most important thing...unfortunately, that product is judged only by the accepted standards of that system. That product, a first film, someone's little baby, gets seen by someone who says, "Ugh, it's not technically perfect," and is rejected accordingly. Now the viewer may be a right-on feminist, but there's an attitude there reflecting values that the commercial media has been very successful at instilling: destroying people's ability to evaluate and react to anything that gets close to their personal lives, and emphasizing instead a technically perfect, bland product. That's probably WMM's hardest role right now—and feminist distribution's—breaking down those concepts of what a "good" or "important" product is.<sup>12</sup>

Importantly, despite its perceived success around the time of the Conference of Feminist Film and Video Organizations in 1975—perhaps even *because* of its perceived success—WMM was not exempt from a kind of financial exploitation or disrespectful treatment from other women's groups who wanted access to the workshop films. When Susan Eenigenburg came to work for WMM in the spring of 1976 (about a year after the conference), she discovered that WMM was due more than \$1,000 for unpaid rental fees. She articulated her frustration with the attitudes of some of these women's groups' in an interview published in *Quest*:

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<sup>12</sup> Ariel Dougherty, Jean Shaw, and Susan Eenigenburg, interview by Charlotte Bunch in *Quest* 3, no. 2 (1976): 47-48.

Women must understand and respect us and not come to us with this culturally-instilled vision that we're part of capitalism, and that therefore, it's okay to rip us off. We're trying to develop some kind of mutual respect and a new relationship within the traditional ways of doing business... Some women's groups...think that because we're all in the movement, they don't have to pay us; in fact, we're so limited in our resources that we need even the little money they could have paid to keep us going. We must recognize that we don't have much money, but that we both have something to offer each other.<sup>13</sup>

Despite these deeply ingrained struggles related to circulating their films, WMM members in 1975—1976 overcame these difficulties and fulfilled one of their major, longtime goals—to produce a high quality educational documentary, distribute it widely to many interested groups, and in the process secure additional organizational income. Patricia White has even marked the national distribution of WMM's first major “in-house” collective production, *Healthcaring: From Our End of the Speculum* (Denise Bostrom and Jane Warrenbrand, 1976), as a major turning point.<sup>14</sup> The film was a collaborative WMM production that was conceived as an educational documentary for use in community organizations. I want to focus on *Healthcaring* in this chapter for a few reasons: it is an especially important film in the history of WMM's collection, it made a crucial imprint on WMM as an institution, and it represents a significant facet of the feminist health movement in the 1970s. Today, we tend to think of the text *Our Bodies, Ourselves* by the Boston Women's Health Book Collective (1973) as emblematic of the 1970s women's health movement, and it was a notable example of women

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid, 51.

<sup>14</sup> See Patricia White's entry on Women Make Movies in Annette Kuhn, ed., *The Women's Companion to International Film* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 429.

challenging and hoping to change established medical practices. But feminist health documentaries, which were produced as direct CR interventions in the women's health movement, deserve a place in this history, too.

When *Healthcaring* was in the early planning stages, Dougherty described the difficulties involved in trying to focus on distribution:

One of the things we're beginning to sink a lot more energy into is distribution, which is an uphill struggle, partly because it's completely unfunded. We've managed to pay from rental fees for a movie last week the cost of mailing it this week, it's been one little piecemeal thing after another. So one of the reasons for doing the health film is that we know there is a real need for a movie like that. And we're hoping that our prints of that movie will help a lot in bringing in a much more substantial income to WMM...The money that comes in from distribution will help people to work on future productions.<sup>15</sup>

Another impetus for bringing in additional money through distribution involved a realization that traditional non-profit fundraising through foundations was especially poor at supporting women's interests and film organizations. Dougherty's frustration stemmed from this and her discovery that "foundations don't really fund adults to do much at all, at least in terms of teaching. Their concept is that adults are the mainstream of society and should be working, not still in the learning process."<sup>16</sup>

While *Healthcaring* was in the process of shooting and editing, WMM described it as an "educational tool," aimed at helping consumers "become more aware of their health and to use

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<sup>15</sup> Ariel Dougherty Papers, 1946-1993; Interviews by Barbara Halpern Martineau, 1974-1975, October 12, 1974; MC 589, folder 12.8.

<sup>16</sup> Ariel Dougherty, Jean Shaw, and Susan Eenigenburg, interview by Charlotte Bunch in *Quest* 3, no. 2 (1976): 50.

the health system more effectively.”<sup>17</sup> The film was also said to reflect the “strong, personal feelings” of the filmmakers, which had been “so valuable in the first films [of the Chelsea Picture Station workshops].”<sup>18</sup>

When the film was completed, a review of *Healthcaring* published in a feminist newsletter stated, “what’s important about this film is that it provides a clear and detailed historical analysis of what has gone into creating and maintain the healthcare system we know today, and it shows women grappling with the enormous burden of changing that system into one which is responsive to human need.”<sup>19</sup> But *Healthcaring* is not only a well-regarded landmark in terms of documentary history and feminist film history; it also a film that signals a critical historical juncture for WMM as an institution. The film received scores of praise, some criticism, and even sparked a dialogue in the academic journal *Jump Cut* in 1978 which I will address later—but *Healthcaring* was nonetheless a significant definer of the cinematic application of feminist consciousness-raising. Put simply, I want to suggest that the film’s historical importance lies not only in its feminist content within the political context of the 1970s women’s health movement, but also in the way it shaped the institutional identity and priorities of WMM.

Prior to producing *Healthcaring*, WMM’s films consisted of those of Dougherty and Paige and the “first films” created by students in the Chelsea Picture Station workshops. Although these works dealt with real life issues important to the students—for example, rape, women in the domestic sphere, careers—they tended to be short fiction films. *Healthcaring* was the first documentary and educational production project, and was described by Dougherty as

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<sup>17</sup> Brochure, ca. 1975, Women Make Movies Papers.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Jo Delaplaine, Review of *Healthcaring* in *Feminist Alliance Against Rape* newsletter, clipping in Women Make Movies Papers.

“somewhat ambitious.”<sup>20</sup> *Healthcaring* was “labored and birthed,” as the opening credits read, by directors Jane Warrenbrand and Denise Bostrom, and about forty additional WMM members worked on the film, including Dougherty and Paige who served as producers.

Warrenbrand had come to WMM in 1973, and she met her co-director in 1974 when Bostrom took her first class. Warrenbrand was one of the earliest workshop students who “just got totally turned on to the whole process of filmmaking,” taught film in a Y in Scarsdale, and worked on many of the WMM productions.<sup>21</sup> She tried to get a job in the film industry, and even worked on overseeing rushes in the pornography industry, but did not find permanent work. Dougherty described her as someone who brought “a tremendous kind of richness to Women Make Movies.”<sup>22</sup> Politically, she was especially committed to combating abortion abuse, which was part of her motivation for creating the health care film.<sup>23</sup> Warrenbrand’s co-director, Bostrom, had been involved with health care in college and worked in television production at channel 13 in New York before joining WMM. Remarkably, *Healthcaring*, which from a technical standpoint is skillfully edited, polished and professional, was their second completed film. The production was funded by grants from the Eva and Lucius Eastman Foundation, First National City Bank, the Mobil Foundation, the Manufacturer’s Hanover Trust, and the New York State Council on the Arts.<sup>24</sup>

*Healthcaring* was also referred to as WMM’s “first apprenticeship training project,” whose aim was to produce an “in-depth, technically proficient film” by pairing new or less

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<sup>20</sup> Ariel Dougherty Papers, 1946-1993; Interviews by Barbara Halpern Martineau, 1974-1975; MC 589, folder 12.8.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Film catalog, ca. 1976, Women Make Movies Papers.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

experienced filmmakers with a more experienced partner on the professional crew.<sup>25</sup> This one-to-one training/producing model was seen as an expansion of WMM's original teaching commitment in the workshops, and the eventual success of *Healthcaring* was thus seen as a testament to the crew apprenticeship model's potential for making high-quality educational films.<sup>26</sup> It was also a response to the desire of WMM members to work more professionally and produce high quality films—technically, aesthetically, and politically—that groups and organizations around the country would want to rent from WMM, thereby providing much-needed funding to keep WMM running.

Finally, *Healthcaring* was made because, for many reasons and many people, a film like it needed to be made. A scarce number of feminist health media works were widely available in the mid-1970s, even though collectives were beginning to put together scores of pamphlets, books, workshops, and visual materials. A medical social worker from Mississippi wrote a letter to WMM to explain her predicament and the dearth of materials aimed at the women she worked with in the south:

Dear WMM:

I am a medical social worker for a Health Department in the rural Mississippi delta area and work extensively with poor, Black, unmarried pregnant women. I also counsel with teens (in schools and family planning clinics) concerning sex education, birth control and adolescent relationship issues. The films we have available through the Health Department are out of date, sexist and boring. They depict white middle-class husband and wife gleefully awaiting the birth of their much-wanted child, and responsible and conscious white middle-class adolescents

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<sup>25</sup> Ariel Dougherty Papers, 1946-1993, Brochure; MC 589, folder 13.6.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

discussing sexuality and birth control in scientific terms. They *never* attack the real issues involved or present viable alternatives.

The purpose of my letter is twofold. I need realistic, down-to-earth films with which the women in this area can identify: films on parenting, pregnancy, breast-feeding, birth control, sex education, relationships, education, identity, self-esteem, etc. They need to be about poor women, Black women, single women, depressed and confused young women—films that reach the core of pride that I know all women possess.

Secondly, if you do not make films of this nature, please consider doing so. Omission of film education on women's health issues, pregnancy prevention and adolescent relationship building furthers the sexist status-quo that I experience here in the rural South.

Sincerely, Mary Bumpas, M.S.W.<sup>27</sup>

I quote this letter in full because the issues raised in it seem representative of those faced by many women around the U.S. It also speaks plainly and urgently about the blatantly racist and sexist perspective of the films about women's health and pregnancy that were available before the influx of feminist health media like *Healthcaring* in the late 1970s. Before analyzing the contexts and distribution of WMM's *Healthcaring* documentary, I want to attend thoroughly to the fairly far-reaching content of the film.

In this section, I provide an overview of the content and structure of Bostrom and Warrenbrand's documentary, which reflects two years of research on the history of women's health care in the U.S., from colonial times through the 1970s. Organized around "talking head"

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<sup>27</sup> Letter from Mary Bumpas to WMM, ca. 1975, Women Make Movies Papers.

interviews with women from the 1970s, still photography, illustrations from medical and historical textbooks, a strong voiceover narration, and footage of feminist groups and women's health organizations, the film exemplifies a traditional "realist" documentary structure.<sup>28</sup>

For roughly a thirty-minute documentary, the film covers remarkable terrain in its overview of women's health care history in the U.S., historical perspectives on how women's bodies and minds have been understood in different historical contexts, individual testimonies by women about the contemporary medical establishment, and feminist health care activism. Because the history, contexts, and perspectives that come together in it were truly revelatory for a film in 1976 and form powerful feminist arguments, I want to detail the content of the film very thoroughly.

There are essentially three primary threads interwoven throughout the film: analytical history, individual women's testimonies, and documentation of feminist solutions to the problems of the dominant healthcare industry. The first thread presents in detail a history of women's health care in the U.S., mostly through illustrations, images from medical reference books, photos, and voiceover narration. Relying on the visual discourses of medicine, the film shows how practices around women's health care transformed over the past few hundred years. It suggests that in colonial times, women cared for themselves and one another and physicians were called in only for emergencies; women were midwives and passed down information to their daughters and granddaughters. We see illustrations of childbirth from colonial America, midwives and their birth stools, and notably there are only women in these images caring for one another in their homes. Underpinning this historical narrative is the idea that for generations,

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<sup>28</sup> Referencing this film and *Self-Health*, Julia Lesage argued for the subversive potential of this form in the context of feminist organizing in her seminal essay, "The Political Aesthetics of the Feminist Documentary," which originally appeared in the *Quarterly Review of Film Studies* in 1978 and has since been revised and reprinted in several anthologies.



menstruation, pregnancy and menopause were “normal” and healthy functions, childbirth was “a natural procedure,” and women were responsible for their own bodies and for assisting one another. This tradition is now lost, according to the film, since it was foiled by the establishment of modern obstetrics in the 1800s, university trained male doctors, new technologies, and the institutionalization of obstetrics and gynecology. Women’s health care moved from the home, traditionally women’s domain, to the male physician’s clinic. While from a present perspective, this section seems to romanticize and idealize a certain kind of home-centered approach to women’s health (without citing earlier rates of infant and maternal mortality, for example), in the 1970s this kind of historical narrative was largely unknown, and the film was likely eye-opening for many viewers.

Stark, alarming drawings of the new tools that emerged in the 1800s like forceps, hooks, and other surgical implements accompany the educational voiceover that describes how the process of childbirth, for example, transformed from a women-centered midwife practice to a male doctor-administered surgical procedure. Through compelling archival illustrations and photos, this part of the film shows how processes and conditions related to menstruation, pregnancy, and childbirth were defined and overtaken by a developing patriarchal medical establishment, so that, as the narrator says, “all our biological functions had become dirty and diseased.” The film also documents the 1847 formation of American Medical Association, which created a professional image to gain control over medicine, and, according to the film, established attitudes about women’s “unique constitutions” that remain in play today.

The film substantiates this argument that certain attitudes about women’s bodies and health circulate in the present by compiling a number of convincing images from 1970s popular culture—book covers, advertisements, and other visual objects. For example, we see a picture of

an “irritable” women in a drug company ad, an outrageous illustration of an angry woman with the text “taming the premenstrual shrew;” we also see a book cover for “Miserable Millie: Still bound to the premenstrual past.” The film emphasizes how pharmacists and drug companies have historically marketed products to women in particular, and provides statistics, images, and a historical view of women’s relationship to pharmaceuticals and various curative potions and tonics. We see a series of disturbing images from 1970s drug company ads, one of which shows a woman with strings attached to her as a “puppet” of depression, which the advertised drug can manipulate to pull her back up and break the strings. The narrator informs us that women consume fifty percent more prescription drugs than men, and three times as many antidepressants and tranquilizers.

Following these statistics, we then see the historical antecedent to contemporary drug company conventions in the form of illustrated ads from the Victorian period. Archival images and illustrated ads from magazines show women holding various bottles and tins, and demonstrate how they were offered an onslaught of potions, tonics, creams to deal with the chronic nuisance of being female: “Dr. Worden’s Female Pills: an infallible specific for female troubles, nerve difficulties;” “Bust cream: unrivaled for enlargement;” “the improved vertical and reverse current syringe” for birth control; and “Madame Dean’s French Female Pills” for “relief in female disorders of the menstrual function.” The voiceover narration underscores the fact that a number of these compounds from the past and present are addictive and even lethal, while drug companies ignore the dangers for many years in favor of marketing and profitability.

To provide an example of the damage that drug company concealment does to women, the film’s narrator outlines a case study of the synthetic estrogen drug Diethylstilbestrol, or DES. For years, doctors thought DES would help prevent miscarriage or adverse pregnancy

complications, and also used it to treat a variety of medical issues. Despite a complete lack of evidence of its effectiveness at preventing miscarriage and research that showed DES caused cancer in lab animals, DES was still administered regularly to pregnant women from the 1940s through 1970.<sup>29</sup> In the early 1970s, research published in the *New England Journal of Medicine* linked DES exposure to cancer by showing that a high percentage of girls whose mothers had been given DES while pregnant developed rare vaginal tumors, and DES became established as a carcinogen.<sup>30</sup> Despite this disturbing finding and other research that showed the devastating harm DES did to children *in utero*, the FDA did not ban the use of it, but rather asked doctors to stop administering it to their patients voluntarily. When *Healthcaring* was produced in 1976, the effects of this medical tragedy were still very much headline news and became additional, powerful fodder for feminist activism around healthcare, patient rights, and transparency.

Advocacy for a safe and effective birth control pill was a major and well-known facet of the women's movement of the 1960s and 1970s. The film takes up this issue in an interesting way—instead of simply celebrating the gains made by feminist action around the Pill, the issue is addressed more critically. The film discusses the marketing of an early version of “the Pill” as safe, despite its known problems. It also shows the upsetting reaction of the medical establishment when women had problems with the original Pill: one woman who experienced massive hemorrhaging as a side effect of the Pill tells her story of complaining to her doctor and essentially being dismissed, since she had asked for contraception, received it, and then complained about its effects—a kind of “damned if you do” scenario.

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<sup>29</sup> The CDC estimates that 5-10 million people were exposed to DES between 1938 and 1970, including the mothers who were administered DES and the children born of those pregnancies.

<sup>30</sup> Further research showed that children exposed to DES in the womb, but especially DES daughters, are at increased risk for a host of serious health problems, including breast cancer, vaginal and cervical cancer, infertility, cysts, and structural abnormalities of the reproductive system. WMM distributes Judith Helfand's poignant documentary about her own experience as a “DES daughter” called *A Healthy Baby Girl* (1997).

The second major thread in the documentary includes many examples of this kind of individual “talking head” testimonial from a diverse group of women who describe their various experiences with OBGYN health care, and these testimonials are woven throughout the critical history that comprises the first thread. Another interviewed woman tells her story of how in giving birth, the attending doctor gave her an undisclosed medication without her consent. Two days later, in a lot of pain and with swollen breasts, she went to an infirmary where they tried to help her; but when they asked what she had been given at the hospital, she did not know. The narrator asserts, “If we want better care for our bodies, we must learn the benefits and risks of medications. It is our right to know. It is also our right to refuse treatment.”

The testimonials in the film range in intensity, from that of a woman who describes an impersonal encounter with a doctor during a routine gynecological visit and his upsetting lack of transparency about what was happening during the exam, to another by a young woman who was raped, and describes how after being taken to the hospital, her attending doctor did not believe her, and for fifteen minutes, tried to get her to “confess” that she had not been raped. A middle-aged woman shares her story of visiting a doctor who insisted something was very wrong with her but would not tell her what it was. He almost forced her into a cab to the hospital against her will, but she shoved and punched him and ran home. Sometime later, she read in the newspaper that this doctor had performed 2,000 unnecessary hysterectomies.

This woman’s story is used as a springboard to tackle a disturbing historical view of hysterectomies and ovarian surgeries. The narrator states that in 1975, hysterectomies were the second most frequent operation performed and mentions a *New England Journal of Medicine* study that revealed that one-third of them are unnecessary. Also cited is a 1975 report by the Health Policy Advisory Center, which called attention to the practice of using unnecessary

surgeries and forced sterilization as a form of population control: “In most major teaching hospitals in New York City, it is the unwritten policy to do elective hysterectomies on poor, black, and Puerto Rican women.” As the narrator describes the report, we see images and illustrations of the procedure. The narration draws out interesting connections between the historical application of eugenics in the U.S., a history of gynecological surgeries, and a history of medical theory that attributed women’s “sickliness” to the presence of the ovaries and uterus.

The film’s attention to the larger social and political contexts for hysterectomies and ovariectomies—and their use by doctors for controlling women socially rather than for necessary medical purposes—is particularly interesting. Using illustrations and voiceover, the film shows how Victorian era doctors often attributed various ailments to problems with the ovaries, how forced sterilization was practiced on uninformed slave women in the 1800s, and how later the hysterectomy became a common, even fashionable practice for rich women to elect to have. The film suggests that medical theory had validated women’s “sickly” role in society, and medical treatments perpetuated it. Accompanying this narration is an illustration of white male doctors and medical students filling a large stadium-style lecture hall, all focused on a nude woman lying before them on an examining table.

Addressing the debates over gender ideology in relation to medical practices in the Victorian period, the narrator sheds light on how women’s reproductive health was viewed in relation to their intellectual development. Physicians at the time sustained the myth that surgical removal of the ovaries cured women of mental instability, which at the time included any number of challenges to social norms, such as women seeking higher education or suffragism. Prevailing conceptions of women’s biology in the field of medicine perpetuated the idea that too much development of a female brain would atrophy the uterus and therefore destroy a woman’s

ability to bear children. Seemingly in opposition to this understanding, ovariectomies were suggested as “cures” for women who aspired publicly to an intellectual or political life. The narrator opines, “With the threat of gynecological surgery, few women would challenge the existing sexual roles.” A historic triumph by Dr. Mary Putnam Jacobi challenged these prevailing gender politics in Victorian era medicine, as noted in the film. Jacobi was a pioneering American physician who provided scientific studies to refute the claims, made famous by Edward Clarke at Harvard College, that women had fragile constitutions and risked physical depletion or sterility if they sought higher education; and she combated the widespread tendency at the time to use fabricated biological science to reinforce the social and political subordination of women.<sup>31</sup>

By juxtaposing in-depth historical narration, such as this, which shows how contemporary medical practices were established and institutionalized, with contemporary talking head testimonies of women that describe their experiences with health care, the film *Healthcaring* suggests that women’s health care was, over time, essentially hijacked by a patriarchal regime that created unacceptable or outright harmful conditions for women.

The third and final thread in *Healthcaring*, however, is a hopeful and positive documentation of political activism around women’s health, and presents women questioning the medical establishment and retaking control over their own care, and proposing concrete feminist solutions to the dominant health care industry. An excerpt from a 1974 American Medical Association newsletter, which is read in the voiceover, sets off this segment very compellingly: “What is it that has caused many patients, even the more docile soft spoken ones, to suddenly

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<sup>31</sup> The film mentions Jacobi briefly as an important figure in the history of American medicine. In 2009, Carla Bittel published a comprehensive biography of Jacobi, tracing how biological research impacted 19th-century women’s movements, labor reform, and suffrage. See Carla Jean Bittel, *Mary Putnam Jacobi and the Politics of Medicine in Nineteenth-Century America*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009).

start questioning every procedure, every RX? To come out with shocking position statements on premarital sex, lesbianism, and childless marriages? To insist on using natural childbirth, breastfeeding, and diaphragms, when modern medicine has provided it much less bothersome and painless alternatives?”

In this part of the film, we see images of women’s marches, abortion rights protest signs (the Roe v. Wade decision had been in 1973), posters stating “end sexism in healthcare” and promoting natural childbirth and breastfeeding. Footage of newly organized women’s health collectives, health fairs, and community clinics shows women sharing medical skills, teaching one another how to perform self-exams, and facilitating supportive group discussions about challenging the system. While we observe this positive documentation, the narrator explains that women are questioning the medical establishment and helping one another through health fairs, self-help groups, and health education, all of which serve to “unclog” medical myths. She declares: “as we’re learning about our bodies, we’re learning what we want and need from the healthcare system.”

Near the end of the film, two community clinics are given particular attention: one in Somerville, MA and one in Chinatown, New York City, and both segments communicate a palpable sense of accomplishment and empowerment through interviews with women involved in them and footage of activities at the clinic sites. The focus on women in Chinatown who organized a health clinic in 1971 stresses the importance of community health education, particularly that which serves elderly and low-income residents. Operating as a collective, the Somerville Women’s Health Project offers and advocates for alternative means of health care as a right. Everyone involved has input, talks about what works well and what needs improvement, and a strong sense of community and collectivity is present. Furthermore, throughout the film,

and in the clinic footage in particular, a sense of diversity in terms of class, race, ethnicity, and age is apparent and complicates the myth that the 1970s women's movement projects were dominated by white middle-class women.

There is an essentially informational sequence explaining and showing what a mammogram is, what a Pap smear does, how to do a breast self-exams, and so on. While this component of the film is not especially interesting cinematically—it includes shots of women speaking to one another in clinic settings, pointing at diagrams in books, and attending collective clinic meetings, the voiceover narration describes the aims and successes of these community solutions. One notable element of this educational, “self-help” thread in the film involves what was likely viewed as a surprising and graphic scene of performing a cervical self-examination. The narrator points out that the Cancer Society started encouraging breast self-exams, and that the next logical step for women's self-help would be a self-examination of the inside of vagina.

A woman who has appeared several times in the film as a talking head to speak passionately about the necessity of women becoming more comfortable with their own bodies and demanding better care from their doctors, all of a sudden appears with different framing—a long shot so that her entire body is in view. She parts her legs, spreads them wide open directly in front of the camera, and proceeds to explain how to perform a vaginal self-examination with a personal plastic speculum--a hand mirror, and a high-intensity light. She performs a self-exam, then inserts a finger into her vagina, smells and licks her finger, and reinforces the idea that women should be much more comfortable with and knowledgeable about their reproductive parts, despite society having taught them that they are dirty and repulsive. The women shown in this scene, Lolly and Jean Hirsch, were a mother and daughter team that taught women how to view their own cervixes, and encouraged the act as a routine practice that should become as



normal and expected as brushing teeth. Portraying this kind of exercise was not unheard of in feminist health documentaries; a similar scene with more participants occurs in *Self-Health*, and was perhaps one of the more debated parts of the film—an issue which I will take up later.

*Healthcaring* as a whole is a technically impressive documentary and often powerful, but its most stirring aspect is the juxtaposition of individual stories of mistreatment, insensitivity, intimidation, and exploitation with a critical history of the male-created and -dominated conception of “modern” medical practices. *Healthcaring* is profoundly educational, but it also enacts “cinematic consciousness-raising,” as one reviewer noted. The film does not just challenge traditional medical attitudes towards women’s bodies; it historicizes medicine’s conceptions of women’s health and conditions, including terms like weak, hysterical, and fragile. These concepts are traced alongside broader concerns about medical schools, hospitals, drug companies, and the FDA, as well as predominant cultural assumptions and attitudes about women’s “proper” social roles, intelligence, abilities, and mental health. But the film also demonstrates possible alternatives to the dominant health care industry, and ends on a hopeful note by filming a large group of diverse women singing an original song written for the film by Casse Culver: “We stand here free and stronger, we refuse to suffer any longer, we’ll fight for dignity we women will be heard, we know that we are whole now, we own our bodies and our souls now, we’ll win our dignity we women will be heard.” The camera focuses on individual faces and small groups within the crowd, emphasizing how different women—older and younger women, of different races and backgrounds, have come together to raise consciousness and advocate for better women’s health care. The camera then cuts away from an elderly woman’s face to show part of the crowd, and slowly zooms out to show the whole crowd of women; the last shot shows the group finishing another chorus of the song and erupting in cheers.

### 3.1 THE IMPACT OF *HEALTHCARING*

When *Healthcaring* was shown at festivals in 1976, it was described as an instance of “cinematic consciousness-raising.”<sup>32</sup> Like other women’s health films that came out around the same moment, such as *Self-Health*, by the San Francisco Women’s Health Collective (1974), *Taking Our Bodies Back: the Women’s Health Movement*, by Margaret Lazarus, Renner Wunderlich, and Joan Fink of Cambridge Documentary Films (1974), *The Chicago Maternity Center Story* by Kartemquin Films (1976), and the famed book *Our Bodies, Ourselves* by the Boston Women’s Health Book Collective (1973), *Healthcaring* embodied the merging of feminist media production with the drive of the 1970s women’s health movement: analytical history, education, and empowerment. In this section, I would like to address the critical reception of *Healthcaring* in various settings.

Before these films were made, there really were not any films like them, and accordingly, there was a high demand for feminist health films. *Healthcaring* managed to distinguish itself among the influx of women’s health media, including the films cited above, as well as various other media like the HealthRight Collective informational newsletters, books like *Circle One: A Woman’s Guide to Self Health and Sexuality*, and Lolly and Jean Hirsch’s slideshow presentation.<sup>33</sup> *Healthcaring* even won several awards, including the Judges Award at the Sinking Creek Film Festival in Tennessee, 2<sup>nd</sup> Place at the Ninth Annual International Film Festival in Nyon, Switzerland, and a Blue Ribbon at the 19<sup>th</sup> Annual American Film Festival sponsored by the Educational Film Library Association. One reviewer who saw the film as part

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<sup>32</sup> Sharon Lieberman, “Feminist Film Lights the Way Out of Medical Dark Ages,” *Majority Report*, August 7, 1976.

<sup>33</sup> See numerous examples in Susan Rennie and Kirsten Grimstad, eds., *The New Woman’s Survival Sourcebook* (New York: Knopf, 1975).

of the National Women's Film Circuit in Washington, D.C., confessed, "My first reaction on learning that a health film was in one of the packages [of Circuit films] was 'Oh, no. Not another health film! Same old stuff. Boring!'"<sup>34</sup> She then went on to explain how *Healthcaring* differed from other feminist health films that she had already seen:

But I was wrong. I have seen a lot of films on women's health and I have found a sameness and tedious quality in most of them. They all say something important about the healthcare movement but something is usually lacking in them. *Healthcaring* is different: it is positive and warm, caring as the title suggests. Women of different ages and backgrounds speak candidly of their experiences with the present health care system, experiences that reveal the abuse and exploitation of women by doctors and drug companies who both tend to care more for profits than for patients. On the positive side, *Healthcaring* documents the growing number of women who are questioning the existing medical system and working to implement alternative and more effective health care....I thoroughly enjoyed this film and wasn't "bored" at all.

After summarizing the parts of the film in detail, another reviewer in *Cineaste* wrote, "It is precisely the aim of the film to encourage women to learn about their rights to better health care. Utilizing a simple, straightforward approach, *Healthcaring* succeeds in giving a lively and balanced presentation that will touch women emotionally as well as intellectually."<sup>35</sup>

The pedagogical emphasis in *Healthcaring* is presented with a tone of warmth and community, noted by the reviewers cited above, and does not fault women who are uneducated about their own anatomy or reproductive health. As one reviewer in the feminist paper *Majority*

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<sup>34</sup> Terri Poppe, "2<sup>nd</sup> National Women's Film Festival," *Off Our Backs* 8.5 (1978): 15.

<sup>35</sup> Renée Delforge, "Healthcaring" [review], *Cineaste* 8.3 (Winter 1977-1978): 55.

*Report* noted, the film “takes the onus of ignorance off women and offers the perspective of history” and shows “how women’s bodies are essential to the self-aggrandizement of the scientific establishment.”<sup>36</sup> Ellen Frankfort, who wrote a book called *Vaginal Politics* in 1973, praised the film for similar reasons: “What a joyous film to see! Instead of making us feel overwhelmed by our ignorance or intimidated by the ‘experts,’ *Healthcaring* helps us to take that first vital step in having control of our bodies—feeling good about them.”<sup>37</sup> In other words, the film focuses its educational messages about women’s health through a critical historical lens, and shows positive responses to feminist solutions instead of any political backlash.

This very tone of warmth, community, the romanticized vision of childbirth before modern obstetrics, and the surfeit of positive feelings, however, also drew some criticism. A debate emerged in the journal *Jump Cut* after a self-identified nurse and mother, Marcia Rothenberg, lambasted the film for being “reactionary,” oversimplifying issues related to public health care’s entrenchment with social and economic realities, and smugly celebrating “good vibes” over preventative medicine.<sup>38</sup> Articulating a fundamentally Marxist reading of the film, she wrote “I certainly would not deny that a white male dominated medical profession maintains its privileged position partly by trying to keep people ignorant,” but she wanted also to draw attention to the conditions which make this structure possible, namely “an economic system where the many produce the wealth and the few appropriate it and use it.”<sup>39</sup> She critiqued the social isolation of the film, which seems to be about the broad idea of women “getting together” to control their lives but does not show enough of this being enacted in the community. In short, Rothenberg’s major criticism was that the women’s self-help and self-education proposed in the

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<sup>36</sup> Sharon Lieberman, “Feminist Film Lights the Way Out of Medical Dark Ages,” *Majority Report*, August 7, 1976.

<sup>37</sup> Film catalog, ca. 1976, Women Make Movies Papers.

<sup>38</sup> Marcia Rothenberg, “Good Vibes vs. Preventative Medicine,” *Jump Cut* 17 (April 1978), 3.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

film falls short in clarifying the “nature of the system,” and that the politics of the film suggest a kind of “narrow feminism” and “alternative lifestyle,” rather than a comprehensive look at public health institutions in the context of stark social and economic injustices.<sup>40</sup>

A later issue of *Jump Cut* featured a continued conversation about the film. In defense of *Healthcaring*, physician Lawrence Diller suggested that Rothenberg had “missed the point,” argued that “education is liberation,” and agreed that “as long as profit dictates the medical system, the needs of those without money and privilege...will go unfulfilled.”<sup>41</sup> In addition he pointed out that the film presented the ideas of self-education and self-help in a positive light, which made it informative as well as energizing. He proposed “there is definitely a place for a documentary that not only educates but makes you feel good as well,” especially if “seeing other women feeling good about themselves might be one of the catalysts needed to urge people forward.”<sup>42</sup> Rothenberg responded in the same issue of *Jump Cut*, defending her claim that the film needed a better demonstration of “how and who is educated, how people get together to struggle for better health care.”<sup>43</sup> She maintained that “education alone is not liberation” and while “there has been some education and consciousness-raising taking place as a result of the counter-cultural health movement,” it affected only small parts of the population. For the “masses of the poor and minorities” she worked with at the Cook County Hospital in Chicago, she saw “no relief in good vibes.”<sup>44</sup>

Interestingly, two male physicians reviewed *Healthcaring* alongside the film *Self-Health* in the feminist media journal *Camera Obscura*, and while they maintained the films provided

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Lawrence Diller, “Health Education and Welfare,” *Jump Cut* 21 (November 1979), 29.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Marcia Rothenberg, Reply to Lawrence Diller, *Jump Cut* 21 (November 1979), 29.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

important feminist perspectives, they were also highly critical of *Healthcaring's* historical reconstruction and even debunked misleading narration in the film around cultural treatments of menstruation, pregnancy, and menopause. Like Rothenberg, Stephen Grosz and Bruce McAuley were skeptical of *Healthcaring's* lack of specific social frameworks and its proposition to use gender as a basis for reorganizing medicine. A more comprehensive approach to this reorganization, according to the authors, would be to address the current inadequacies of hospitals, professional schools, fee-for-service practices, health insurance companies, and preventative care, in addition to the rampant sexual discrimination in medicine. That the film makes “no mention of poverty, nutrition, employment, or family life” was troubling to the authors because it confuses the goal to reclaim control of sexuality—the overt focus of *Healthcaring* and *Self-Health*—with overall health, therefore “leaving women unprotected from genuine dangers to their health” such as smoking and lung cancer.<sup>45</sup>

Grosz and McAuley were especially critical of the emphasis in *Healthcaring* and *Self-Health* on seeing one's own genitalia with a speculum and questioned the goals and importance of this self-examination. They asked whether it was to identify potential abnormalities for later consultation with a physician, or more “provocatively” to challenge the traditional role of the physician in dominant health care. In other words, how were women to process and use their visual, gynecological observations? For the authors, these concerns were not made clear in either film. They claimed that by assuming “the gaze is an incontrovertible source of knowledge,” the film accepts a neutral gaze: visual knowledge that results in control.<sup>46</sup> Citing Michel Foucault's theorization of the gaze of modern medicine in *The Birth of the Clinic*, they wrote “the new women's clinic in accepting the free gaze as the source of medical knowledge

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<sup>45</sup> Stephen Grosz and Bruce McAuley, “*Self-Health* and *Healthcaring*” (review), *Camera Obscura* 3.7 (1981): 131.

<sup>46</sup> Grosz and McAuley, 130.

and power repeats several of the most serious social and epistemological errors of nineteenth-century medicine and of contemporary established medical practice.”<sup>47</sup>

Grosz and McAuley argued that *Healthcaring*’s implication that visually inspecting one’s genitalia brings knowledge and power is an example of a flawed “magic bullet” medical epistemology that encumbered feminist health alternatives, and, the films they discussed.<sup>48</sup> Put differently, their major criticism of *Healthcaring* and its relation to the women’s health movement was that seeing one’s own cervix, operating a women’s clinic, and “feminizing” medicine were insufficient actions. These gestures would not cure sexism in medicine, structural inequalities in health care delivery, or any particular medical condition for that matter—and could even pose dangers to women who might have symptoms or conditions invisible to medically untrained and unqualified examiners.

Writing a critical essay in 1999 about specular scenes, scholar Eithne Johnson challenges what Grosz and McAuley took to be the “realist” effect in *Self-Health* and *Healthcaring* and their discussion of the “neutral gaze.” She refers to the specular scenes of genital self-examination in feminist health documentaries of the 1970s as “a reflexive act of self-representation” and a performance that is “a means for female body-image production.”<sup>49</sup> For Johnson, these documentaries were very much “connected to their respective communities...produced through an ‘artisanal’ mode,” and she cites Bill Nichols’ discussion of subjectivity and social actors--subjects “who can ‘be themselves’ before a camera in an emotionally revealing manner.”<sup>50</sup> Ultimately, Johnson acknowledges that 1970s feminist health

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<sup>47</sup> Grosz and McAuley, 132.

<sup>48</sup> Grosz and McAuley, 132.

<sup>49</sup> Eithne Johnson, “Loving Yourself: The Specular Scene in Sexual Self-Help Advice for Women,” in *Collecting Visible Evidence*, ed. Jane Gaines (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999): 223.

<sup>50</sup> Bill Nichols, *Representing Reality* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), quoted in Johnson, 224.

documentaries like *Healthcaring* may not answer Claire Johnston's call for a new approach to cinematic language, but she insists, nonetheless, on the importance of the specular gaze present in these films, especially in terms of a history of documentary subjectivity.

The critical reception of *Healthcaring* is interesting for a few reasons. First, it reflects the broader debates about the women's health movement, consciousness raising, public institutions, health care industries, and profits in the 1970s. And second, discussion of the form and content of the film correlates to critical debates about documentary film in general, and especially feminist documentary practice. In the following section, I would like to address these two contexts for the film's critical reception.

The women's health movement can be seen as distinct from, but certainly linked to, the wider women's movement since it developed in tandem with it, but with a clear focus on developing knowledge about women's bodies and health, and an awareness of the institutional histories that dictated former understandings of women's bodies. Accordingly, feminist scholar and philosopher Nancy Tuana has argued that the women's health movement in the 1970s was not only a liberation movement, but also an epistemological resistance movement.<sup>51</sup> According to Tuana, "to critique and extricate women from oppressive systems" required "undermining the production of ignorance about women's health and women's bodies...[and] creating liberatory knowledges."<sup>52</sup>

She also draws out the distinction between the goal to make available to women "basic medical knowledge," (i.e. female anatomy, processes of ovulation and facets of menopause, etc.), and the goal to reexamine the *structures* of traditional medicine to "transform our

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<sup>51</sup> Nancy Tuana, "The Speculum of Ignorance The Women's Health Movement and Epistemologies of Ignorance," *Hypatia* 21.3 (2006): 1-19.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid, 2.



knowledge of women's bodies so as to to remove oppression, to augment women's lives, and to transform society.”<sup>53</sup> In sum, the significance of developing liberatory epistemologies in the context of the women's health movement was that they went beyond uncovering particular knowledge claims, to uncover *the power dimensions* of knowledge practices.<sup>54</sup>

What is interesting about the previously discussed reception of *Healthcaring* when it came out in 1976, is that it reflected the documentary's ambitious aim to address these larger liberatory epistemologies—both (1) basic medical knowledge as well as (2) the historical perspectives on power structures and institutional inequalities. Those who praised the film seemed to be grateful for its coverage of this dual content; those who were more critical seemed to want the film to cover less basic medical knowledge (perhaps they felt this was covered adequately elsewhere in books, seminars, etc.), and to cover more of the critical history and community solutions—the more overtly political component.

Tuana also addresses the ways in which “the ignorance of certain groups” was “systematically cultivated” by the medical industry (such as withholding information about profitable oral contraceptives, which some feared were linked to cancers), and how the feminist health movement worked to lift the existing “veil of ignorance” around particular health issues, medical conditions and procedures, and myths.<sup>55</sup> Exposing such instances of racism and discrimination in the involuntary sterilization of women of color, was, thus, a substantial effort within the women's health movement. Liberatory epistemologies such as these registered particularly well visually in the form of the feminist documentary. In *Healthcaring*, for example, the histories of knowledge and the power dimensions of particular knowledge structures that we

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid, 13.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid, 10.

glean from voiceover, photographs, and illustrations, become more significant when combined with the individual testimonies that inflect the narrative with meaning, authority, and emotion.

The attention that *Healthcaring* gives to issues like the pharmaceutical industry's calculated marketing to women, and the prevalence of unnecessary hysterectomies, when juxtaposed with emotionally-charged individual stories that testify to these claims, illustrates poignantly the power of liberatory epistemologies in the context of the women's health movement. But this technique, described simply as using "talking heads," was a debated strategy in the context of documentary practices.

In her seminal essay on feminist documentaries, "The Political Aesthetics of the Feminist Documentary," originally published in the *Quarterly Review of Film Studies* in 1978, Julia Lesage suggested that through the individual stories in these films we see women "reclaiming 'the lost territory' of women's bodies and health"—highly personal acts that have "a strong effect on women's identity, emotional life, and sense of control."<sup>56</sup> Broadly speaking, feminist documentaries were often criticized at this time for not challenging "the language of cinema," in Claire Johnston's words, and the use of talking heads in particular was lambasted for being misperceived as objective reality and having a bland visual quality. Mistrust of talking heads came most notably from Eileen McGarry and particularly in the context of women's documentaries, but Lesage and others like Barbara Halpern Martineau (Sara Halprin) and E. Ann Kaplan defended this form's subversive potential and argued that its accessibility made it important for political organizing.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Julia Lesage, "The Political Aesthetics of the Feminist Documentary Film," *Issues in Feminist Film Criticism*, Ed. Patricia Erens, (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1990), 222-237.

<sup>57</sup> See Eileen McGarry, "Documentary, Realism, and Women's Cinema," *Women and Film* 2.7 (1975): 50-59; Barbara Halpern Martineau, "Talking About Our Lives and Experiences: Some Thoughts About Feminism,

Lesage wrote that feminist documentary filmmakers in the 1970s “saw making these films as an urgent public act and wished to...bring feminist analysis to many women it might otherwise never reach.”<sup>58</sup> Furthermore, she insisted that the talking heads component—stories told by women in their own words—served an aesthetic function by “reorganizing women viewers’ expectations derived from patriarchal narratives and initiating a critique of those narratives” --“rephrasing, criticizing, or articulating for the first time the rules of the game as they have been and as they should be for women.”<sup>59</sup> For Lesage, because these films depict and encourage conversation among women, the individual stories told in them contributed to larger public struggles by using conversation to create “a new social force as a tool for liberation.”<sup>60</sup>

While Lesage’s essay responded to the film in the context of feminist academic Film Studies, the critical reception of *Healthcaring* reflected, too, the larger political debates and contemporary discourses around the women’s health movement in the 1970s. For example, a reflective essay written by members of the Health Right Collective around 1974 articulated what they understood as the three major categories of the work carried out within the women’s health movement: “changing consciousness, providing health related services, and struggling to change established health institutions.”<sup>61</sup> While *Healthcaring* touches on the first two areas, it is not a film that demonstrates or documents women’s health activism toward changing the structure of established medical industry; this was the major criticism expressed by the reviewer Rothenberg, mentioned earlier. Instead, *Healthcaring* focuses on feminist alternatives, like the Somerville

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Documentary, and ‘Talking Heads,’” *Show Us Life: Towards a History and Aesthetics of the Committed Documentary*, ed. Thomas Waugh, (Metuchen: Scarecrow Press, 1984).

<sup>58</sup> Lesage, 223.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid, 233-234.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid, 234.

<sup>61</sup> Rachel Gillett Fruchter, Naomi Fatt, Pamela Booth, and Diana Leidel, “The Women’s Health Movement: Where Are We Now?” in *Seizing Our Bodies: The Politics of Women’s Health*, Claudia Dreifus, ed. (New York: Vintage Books, 1978), 271-278.

Women's Health Project, one of the clinics showcased in the film, which is located in a poorer area of a large city to provide services to the community that they would not easily access otherwise.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, these disagreements about priorities in the health movement corresponded to some of the different political factions of the wider women's movement, such as liberal, radical, and Marxist feminist. In the context of the women's health movement, liberal feminists emphasized the need for sexual equality in medical education and employment (i.e. more female doctors would lessen male medical bias). Radical feminists argued that women should better understand their bodies and what to expect from physicians, and that developing feminist alternative institutions could facilitate better experiences for women. Marxist feminists understood the health care system as part of a larger capitalistic economic and social structure that oppressed women through its commitment to a profit imperative rather than to peoples' needs.<sup>62</sup>

As an accessible feminist documentary film, *Healthcaring* resonated strongly with the energies of the women's health movement and served a number of functions. It delineated critical historical perspectives on women's health that many were unfamiliar with, it provided a range of individual stories as evidence for its larger claims about sexism and other problems in the health industry, and it enacted a pedagogical project similar to *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, but in visual form. The film eventually became the hit of the WMM collection and was requested more than any other film in the late 1970s. Because it was their first major collective production, WMM screened the film locally just like they had done with workshop films. It was said to provoke "many thoughtful discussions about the delivery of women's health care" and its

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<sup>62</sup> See Elizabeth Free, "Women and Health Care: A Comparison of Theories," in *Seizing Our Bodies: The Politics of Women's Health*, Claudia Dreifus, ed. (New York: Vintage Books, 1978), 279-297.

success in the neighborhood even “instigated a special women’s health evening once a week at the local clinic”—evidence of the film’s transformative power in local communities.<sup>63</sup> However, despite marking an important turning point for the organization, the distribution of *Healthcaring* on a national and international level did not come without a few snags and squabbles.

The first obstacle to successful outreach and promotion for *Healthcaring* was the fact that the WMM member charged with overseeing distribution at the time, Susan Eenigenburg, decided to resign. In a distressed letter to her WMM colleagues about promoting the film and getting it out, *Healthcaring* director Denise Bostrom called Eenigenberg “a great paradigm of organization and order” and was saddened because if she could not “make order for herself at WMM, who would?”<sup>64</sup> Related to this troubling departure of the only WMM distributor was Bostrom’s inquiry about a potential sub-distribution deal for *Healthcaring* with Serious Business films, an Oakland, California distributor for independent filmmakers known for more political avant-garde and art films. Serious Business was run by a filmmaker named Freude Bartlett, who made it clear that one of the organization’s primary concerns was “to make available films by and about women.”<sup>65</sup>

*Healthcaring* was described as a film made for a general audience and for reaching as many people as possible, “to spread the word” about the power of the medical establishment and how women can take control of their health needs.<sup>66</sup> It seemed obvious to Bostrom that having both Serious Business and WMM distribute the film to different kinds of audiences could be

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<sup>63</sup> Ariel Dougherty Papers, 1946-1993; MC 589, folder 13.6.

<sup>64</sup> Ariel Dougherty Papers, 1946-1993; Letter from Denise Bostrom, February 6, 1977; MC 589, folder 17.12.

<sup>65</sup> Donna Allen, ed., “Serious Business Company Distributes Women’s Films, New Fall Catalog is Out,” *Media Report to Women* (Washington D.C.: Women’s Institute for Freedom of the Press, December 1, 1978).

<sup>66</sup> Ariel Dougherty Papers, 1946-1993; Letter from Denise Bostrom, February 6, 1977; MC 589, folder 17.12.

only beneficial for the film's outreach, especially since the former had "a fine reputation with all kinds of people."<sup>67</sup> Bostrom argued for joint distribution in her letter:

I have begun to understand that if you're small, and only monetarily small and you want to distribute good, enriching films, it's audacious to presume that you can do an even moderate job on effectively reaching people to see and to benefit from these films....Distribution with other companies helps get the word out and that's what WMM is (was) about. That's what HC [*Healthcaring*] is about and to sit and think WMM can do this alone...is impossible and foolhardy.<sup>68</sup>

The key conflict that developed, however, was that while the co-director wanted to get the film out to as many people as possible and not let it "sit on a shelf and gather dust," because it was a large production involving many people, some WMM members wanted to be able to distribute the film exclusively by themselves.<sup>69</sup> According to Bostrom and Eenigenberg, some WMM members were opposed to any other organization distributing WMM films for "reasons of pride, and not for the reason that WMM can distribute films in an efficient, all-out manner."<sup>70</sup> Bostrom's response to this refusal to cooperate on the part of her WMM colleagues was that their position was "arrogantly paranoid;" she wrote with certainty and clearly some frustration: "If we let this deal... slip through our fingers for any other reason other than that we are positive that WMM can do the best job alone, then we are all flaming assholes."<sup>71</sup>

Bostrom's letter is interesting also because it seems to resonate with some of the common struggles faced by collectives and non-profit organizations, whose members are organizationally

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

inexperienced and whose staff are frequently overworked, overextended, and unable to accomplish all the projects they take on. Bostrom seemed to have some insight into WMM's struggles in this area: "It's just crucial that we begin to know as an organization our strengths and our weaknesses and deal with them. Let's stop pretending what we can do and do what we are able to do. How can we claim to distribute...when we will shortly not have a distributor?"<sup>72</sup> This struggle over the distribution rights became even more interesting, since WMM's eventual success—financially, publicly, internally—in distributing *Healthcaring* became so pivotal in its institutional history.

Regardless of the internal strife caused by jointly distributing the film, *Healthcaring* was distributed by Serious Business for some period of time between its completion in 1976 and 1981, when it was named as the distributor in Grosz and McAuley's review of the film in *Camera Obscura*. Despite these struggles over distribution rights and the general disorder of WMM business and distribution activities at the time, *Healthcaring* was a strong film in high demand, successful at public screenings and festivals, and earned WMM much income and acclaim. It also set a staggering precedent for the role of documentary film specifically in the WMM collection.

Significantly, *Healthcaring* premiered publicly on May 8, 1976, at the Henry Street Settlement House's Arts For Living Center on Grand Street in New York City, an institution that brought together all of the settlement's arts programming under one roof.<sup>73</sup> The Arts for Living Center was one of the first arts facilities in the nation designed for a predominantly low-income population. It was later renamed the Abrons Art Center, and today it continues to offer extensive programming in the visual and performing arts, and functions as an arts instruction and

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Invitation to premier, ca. April 1976, Women Make Movies Papers.

performance space that serves scores of children and adults on the Lower East Side of Manhattan. From WMM's earliest days as an informal filmmaking group in the late 1960s and early 1970s, it maintained a relationship with the Settlement's own Film Club for young filmmakers, and often screened films there. Electing to hold the premiere of WMM's first educational health documentary, *Healthcaring*, in a New York institution well known for its historic involvement in social change efforts (having been founded in 1893), and for serving culturally diverse, immigrant, and low-income populations with social services, health care, educational support, and arts programming, was not just a logical choice, but reaffirmed strongly WMM's social and political investments.

After its premiere, *Healthcaring* became, quite simply, an enormous success for WMM. From 1976—1977, *Healthcaring* was awarded 2<sup>nd</sup> place at the Annual International Film Festival in Nyon, Switzerland, a Judges award at the Sinking Creek Film festival in Nashville, and a Blue Ribbon at the American Film festival. It was also screened at Toronto's Festival of Festivals, the New York City Festival of Women's Films, and various venues around New York City, including the Donnell Library, Brooklyn College, the Women's Coffeehouse, a regional Planned Parenthood conference, the Einstein Medical Center, and the Museum of Modern Art's "What's Happening" series, which was a showcase for new, controversial films that dealt with social and political issues.<sup>74</sup>

Despite the expressed need for a film like *Healthcaring* on the part of numerous health professionals, groups, and organizations around the country, the film's reception in communities was not always automatically glowing, or even successful. One particular case of the film's

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<sup>74</sup> "What's Happening?" Press Release, November 1977, The Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) Press Release Archives, Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY, [http://www.moma.org/docs/press\\_archives/5555/releases/MOMA\\_1977\\_0094\\_89.pdf](http://www.moma.org/docs/press_archives/5555/releases/MOMA_1977_0094_89.pdf)?2010



controversial reception in South Dakota sheds light on the frictions between the feminist health movement (and its correlating media) and powerful conservative factions.

The South Dakota Commission on the Status of Women purchased *Healthcaring* around 1977 and brought the film into communities to discuss issues and policies related to women's health and abortion rights—precisely how WMM intended its use.<sup>75</sup> While the Commission was under-funded at the time (like many around the country), liberal Democratic senator George McGovern supported the Commission's projects. McGovern also fought for the Equal Rights Amendment and abortion rights. However, right-to-life groups and anti-Equal Rights Amendment groups in the state came to dislike how the Commission was using the film.

In short, the conservative organizations eventually succeeded in getting the film removed from the Commission around 1979, and the film print was then relocated to the state library.<sup>76</sup> This made it quite difficult for the Commission to get its hands on the film for use in community screenings, because it faced numerous access challenges—bureaucratic procedures that were designed essentially as a covert mechanism of censorship. In other words, *Healthcaring* had been purchased and used by the Commission for its intended purposes, but was repossessed by the state and no longer available for public screenings. In November 1980, McGovern lost his re-bid as Senator due in large part to the efforts of a conservative committee (National Conservative Political Action Committee, or NCPAC) that targeted Democratic Senators, and *The New York Times* reported that the fight around abortion rights were “important in the

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<sup>75</sup> Ariel Dougherty, Email to author, June 8, 2012.

<sup>76</sup> Ariel Dougherty, Email to author, June 8, 2012.

campaign as well.”<sup>77</sup> By the early 1980s, the Commission on the Status of Women was dissolved, as was its programming, including screenings of *Healthcaring*.

### 3.2 DISTRIBUTION AT WMM

In final this section I would like to elucidate more precisely how *Healthcaring* influenced the distribution efforts of WMM. A document about WMM’s activities, from around 1977, articulates the kind of efforts needed for distribution:

While *Healthcaring* has begun to pave the way towards libraries and health related institutions, distribution will expand in the coming year. The efforts begun during 1976-77 will be enlarged to encompass a more active promotion and advertising campaign. A great deal of work still must go on developing the market and especially as films with new subject matter are added to the collection, new specialized lists will need to be developed.<sup>78</sup>

In the WMM distribution catalog produced around 1976, four full pages out of ten were devoted to *Healthcaring*, even though the catalog listed thirteen titles available for rental or purchase. The catalog was clearly designed to feature *Healthcaring*, one of only two documentary titles out of the total number. A WMM brochure published in 1977, which was also designed to showcase *Healthcaring*, indicated renewed efforts at targeted distribution: “We are mailing our brochure on *Healthcaring*...to medical and nursing schools nationwide...We are

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<sup>77</sup> Iver Peterson, “McGovern Fails In Attempt at Fourth Term as Senator,” *New York Times*, November 5, 1980. <http://select.nytimes.com/mem/archive/pdf?res=F10B10F63B5C11728DDDAC0894D9415B8084F1D3>.

<sup>78</sup> Ariel Dougherty Papers, 1946-1993; MC 589, folder 13.6.

making increased efforts to reach other non-affiliated school and community film societies.”<sup>79</sup> Among the thirteen titles WMM distributed in 1977, *Healthcaring* was described as the “genuine hit of the collection” in a news clipping, which also explained that the film was the “most requested and its repeated showings helped bring about the opening of a women’s clinic in New York. ‘That’s what our films are about,’ said Jaci McSweeney, ‘to bring about action.’”<sup>80</sup> It remained *the most* requested film from the WMM catalog by groups and institutions all around the U.S.

The distribution of *Healthcaring* had enormous ramifications for WMM’s finances and business structure, on the one hand, and for the types of films it would become associated with, on the other; after all, the early workshop films that had been in distribution were short narratives, while *Healthcaring* was the first large-scale documentary film produced and distributed by WMM. The film’s effects on income were quite clear. WMM’s distribution income in 1973 was around \$2300; in 1974 it rose to \$2700 and in 1975 about \$4800.<sup>81</sup> Despite the fact that there is a gap in the sales and rentals bookkeeping for two years, from July 1976—July 1978, it is clear that *Healthcaring* was responsible for the organization’s soaring distribution income in the late 1970s. From July 1978 through October 1980, 60% of WMM’s total distribution income came from *Healthcaring*, even though an average of thirty titles circulated at that time. In that period, the film brought in *more than 7 times* as much distribution income as the next highest-grossing title in circulation. In 1976, the film rented for \$40 and could be purchased for \$375. By 1980, the rental price was \$60 and the purchase price increased to \$500.

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<sup>79</sup> Ariel Dougherty Papers, 1946-1993; Brochure, ca. 1977; MC 589, folder 1.5.

<sup>80</sup> “Female Film Forum,” Clipping, December 1977, Women Makes Movies Papers.

<sup>81</sup> Bookkeeping records, Women Make Movies Papers.

In 1977, documentary films including *Healthcaring* represented 15% (or just two out of thirteen titles) in the distribution collection. By 1980, however, documentaries comprised 35% of the collection, or 14/40 films. Even in 1981, when *Healthcaring* was already five years old, it was still *the most requested title* in the collection for previews and rentals. Notably, six out of the top ten most requested titles at that time were documentaries, and documentary titles comprised 70% of all preview and rental requests.<sup>82</sup>

The analysis above is possible in part because starting with *Healthcaring*, WMM analyzed distribution trends, calculating which titles were most ordered, what regions requested films, and what kinds of organizations and institutions were most frequently requesting certain titles. A distribution report from 1981 indicated what kinds of organizations requested WMM titles, including social service/government agencies, women's groups, and health organizations.<sup>83</sup> The distribution of *Healthcaring* at the turn of the decade, thus, marked an immensely formative moment in WMM's institutional history. It not only helped the organization recognize what kinds of film forms and subjects were in demand, in order to help them plan for the future, it also helped WMM identify important markets for the kinds of films they already distributed, such as libraries, women's groups, community centers, health clinics, film festivals, media arts organizations, churches, schools and universities, and academic conferences.

With the aim of bringing in additional income through the distribution of professional quality, in-demand, educational films like *Healthcaring*, starting in 1978, WMM began to solicit additional film submissions from other collectives, organizations, and individuals. Interestingly, the WMM staff person who directed the renewed distribution initiatives at the time was Pamela

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<sup>82</sup> Bookkeeping records, Women Make Movies Papers.

<sup>83</sup> "Film Distribution Service," ca. 1981, Women Make Movies Papers.

Yates, who went on to make highly influential human rights documentaries from the 1980s through the present and is an acclaimed documentary filmmaker in the U.S. today; she also founded Skylight Pictures, a documentary production company. In the late 1970s, Yates worked as the distributor for WMM as it tried to expand its distribution catalog.

In April, 1978, Yates wrote a press release aimed at filmmakers, producers, distributors, and media organizations that included a brief description of WMM's primary commitment, which was articulated at the time as "the development of feminist media as a tool for social change and growth."<sup>84</sup> It stated further: "In both production and distribution we attempt to reflect the lives of women in society past, present, and future."<sup>85</sup> The call for films also lists the primary subjects of interest, which included "healthcare and control of our bodies, violence toward women, role models and socialization process, minority and working women and women's culture."<sup>86</sup>

To briefly conclude, there are a number of productive reasons to attend attention to this particular object in feminist film history and to WMM's role as an organization. First, the content of *Healthcaring* was a groundbreaking summary of the power structures that dictated women's experiences of medical care, and that kind of content resonated widely with the women's health movement. Second, WMM's workshop participants produced the film collectively, which both actualized an early goal of the organization and opened up potential for a new kind of production model. Third, the documentary was shown widely to women's groups, health clinics, and community groups; it won several awards, and gained enormous visibility at international film festivals. *Healthcaring* thus solidified WMM's rising position "on the map" of

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<sup>84</sup> Ariel Dougherty Papers, 1946-1993; Brochure, ca. 1977; MC 589, folder 13.7.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

<sup>86</sup> Ariel Dougherty Papers, 1946-1993; Brochure, ca. 1977; MC 589, folder 13.7.

contemporary feminist media institutions and started to solidify WMM's image as a source for high-quality feminist documentaries—this is primarily what it is known for in the present. Through the film's distribution to educators, health organizations, libraries, community and feminist groups who then raved about the documentary's pedagogical usefulness and political importance, WMM recognized important markets and support structures for its films, and a way to fill in the gaps of foundation fundraising.

Although internal struggles and recurring discussions about how to best manage film distribution would continue at WMM through the early 1980s, the successes of *Healthcaring* in the late 1970s are remarkable. Distributing *Healthcaring* set a course for WMM's success as a certain kind of women's film organization—one that would not likely be able to provide instruction for brand new women filmmakers any longer, but one that would work to ensure that films made by women about women's issues would be seen by audiences, and that broader knowledge about these films would continue to spread nationally and internationally. In the next chapter, I explore (1) why the immediate success of the film *Healthcaring* did not translate smoothly into success for WMM as an organization, (2) the complex factors that enabled WMM to survive as it grappled with the tension between wanting to adhere to idealistic feminist organizing principles and pressures to professionalize, and (3) a set of meaningful institutional turning points from the late 1970s—mid-1980s that reshaped the organization while it worked to maintain its original mission to support films by and about women.

#### 4.0 IDEOLOGY AND INSTITUTIONALIZATION

The WMM production *Healthcaring: From Our End of the Speculum* (Denise Bostrom and Jane Warrenbrand, 1976), which I have discussed at length in the previous chapter, stands out in WMM's history. Furthermore, the context in which it was made serves as an important springboard for the narrative of this chapter. Several things about it are noteworthy. First, when it was produced in 1976, its content was a groundbreaking feminist history of the power structures that dictate women's experiences of medical care. In the present, we tend to think of *Our Bodies, Ourselves* from the Boston Women's Health Book Collective as the emblematic text of the 1970s feminist health movement, and it is clearly a notable example of the movement's epistemological project. But feminist health documentaries, which were produced as direct consciousness-raising ("CR") interventions in the political discourses around women's bodies, deserve a place in this history, too. Second, *Healthcaring* typifies the realist feminist documentary form, the politics of which were debated vigorously by film scholars in the 1970s and 1980s. Third, *Healthcaring* marks the beginning of a critical period of restructuring for WMM as an organization. It is the developments of this era, which saw a move from organizational precariousness to stability around film distribution in particular, that I elaborate on further in this chapter. In the present, WMM is known for primarily two programs: production assistance and distribution, and in this chapter I explore how structural changes in the

1980s laid the groundwork for strengthening distribution as an institutional commitment and model for stability.

For *Healthcaring's* political and social context, the ways it resonated with critical discourses in the academy, and the ways it shaped the institutional identity and priorities of WMM, the film can be seen as a noteworthy endeavor in a history of feminist film and an influential object in the history of WMM. However, despite the film's significance, WMM was unable to translate successfully the momentum it brought to the organization into decisive and immediate institutional goals. After the completion of *Healthcaring*, WMM pursued projects too diffuse to create a solid foundation for institutional stability; it lost much of its funding, and it was persistently in a state of transition for a number of years without a long-term strategy in place.

In 1978, Janet Benn and Caryl Ratner proposed to the Board a serious rethinking of WMM's direction. They wrote:

Women Make Movies needs direction. It needs to define itself—to itself and to the world at large. It needs to coldly and critically appraise its strengths and weaknesses. It needs to frankly analyze in which areas it realistically does not live up to its projected image...If Women Make Movies is to grow and ultimately, if Women Make Movies is to survive...we must consider the Big Picture—evading or avoiding this responsibility will simply mean that Women Make Movies will continue to limp along as it now does, from crisis to crisis—and positive, creative energy will continue to be dissipated by the pervasive and overwhelming reality of directionless strategy and wasted effort. This year, with



a full-time staff, is the perfect opportunity for Women Make Movies to get its shit together.<sup>1</sup>

I find this reflection interesting not only because of its frank openness—you can feel the frustration in the language—but because it illustrates so concretely the tensions that WMM grappled with during the period. The mandates “to define,” “to appraise,” signaled a push toward institutionalization that the whole of WMM—however fragmented it was at the time—seemed reticent to accept.

Part of this chapter explores a set of structural tensions in play in the years around the turn of the decade, which created a number of challenges for WMM. While *Healthcaring* was an important manifestation of WMM’s political values and a milestone for WMM at the end of the 1970s (with its national visibility and distribution income), the loose collective structure of the organization itself, which was enacted after the 1975 reorganization meetings, proved to be basically unsustainable. WMM’s external image to the world—framed by the polish of *Healthcaring*, and its general reputation as a “model” feminist media organization—conflicted with its internal dysfunction. At this time, WMM had essentially three main bodies: a few paid staff positions (an important gain, although these varied year to year), a wider, collectively organized membership base of women who worked on various projects and film productions, and a Board, which underwent numerous transformations during the period.

In several ways, what occurred during the span of approximately eight years (between the release of *Healthcaring* and the repositioning of WMM as primarily a distribution organization under new leadership [1983-84]), seems like a confusing sequence of events, a jumbled haze of disparate activities, and a series of vague and constantly shifting articulations of WMM’s

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<sup>1</sup> Janet Benn and Caryl Ratner, Memorandum to Board of Directors, June 28, 1978, Women Make Movies Papers.

purpose and commitments. Precisely who was working at WMM and when, who was a member and in what capacity, and which films were distributed each year are all items that are hard to state with certainty. This period, then, marked by an unfocused mission, a muddled sense of organizational structure, and general disorder might be read as a “low point” in WMM’s institutional history, making it tempting to skim over it to get to a moment of progress and achievement. However, in this chapter I dwell on some of the specific difficulties, disorder, and internal and external tensions that characterize WMM’s constant state of flux during this period. While this history and the details of its constant reorganization might seem incoherent and somewhat repetitive, what transpired in this period generated the conditions that led eventually to WMM’s substantial reinvention in the 1980s. I want to suggest that forging an evolved institutional identity was made possible because of nearly a decade of wrestling with a set of conflicting ideological commitments.

This chapter explores the various branches and programs of WMM that contributed to the ongoing transformations from the late 1970s through the 1980s, in order to better understand how activities and changes in this period shaped WMM’s more recent institutional profile and the extent of its larger cultural influence. I describe several dimensions of WMM’s presence during this period: (1) the staff, membership, and the Board—their reconfigurations, and the reasons behind their tenuous relations, (2) the near-constant reassessments of the distribution program, and (3) the leadership and programs of the mid-1980s that set a new course for WMM’s image in the realm of independent media. Throughout the chapter, a number of interesting and productive tensions frame these thorny historical details: those between the structures imposed by funding sources and the ideals of collective organization, between income-generating business models and feminist ideals of collectivity or non-hierarchical organization,

between articulating a commitment to diversity and actualizing it, and between the connotations of a “professional” film organization and an “activist” media group (i.e. how the public and government funding entities understand these categories).<sup>2</sup>

During the period from 1978—1986, WMM struggled to define itself in the context of a challenging climate characterized by constant financial hardship and uncertainties; inconsistent staff, membership, and programming activities; and internal tensions around art, politics, difference, and professionalization. In the first section, I focus on the numerous “false starts” of WMM’s distribution endeavors in the late 1970s and the challenges related to making this an effective program. The second section elucidates important political and economic contexts for understanding WMM’s financial struggles in the early 1980s (as well as those of other small arts organizations around the U.S.). In the third section, I describe the initiatives that allowed WMM to reinvent itself once again in the 1980s and its ongoing processes of professionalization and institutionalization.

WMM struggled to run an efficient distribution program in the late 1970s, as evidenced by the fact that there is an apparent two-year gap in the distribution income records between June 1976 and July 1978. In the first half of 1976, there were eight titles in circulation, including the co-founders’ two feature films (Dougherty’s *Sweet Bananas* and Paige’s *Women’s Happy Time Commune*), and early Chelsea Picture Station workshop short films such as *Paranoia Blues* and *Just Looking*. These titles brought in \$1,527 of income, most significantly from Paige’s film, which accounted for 65% of the income from January—June 1976. From June 1977 to June 1978, there were twelve titles in circulation, including approximately twenty prints of WMM’s

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<sup>2</sup> I want to cite Haidee Wasson’s book on the history of the MoMA Film Library, in which she analyzes multiple pressures faced by the Film Library in the 1930s and 1940s. Although she deals with a different era, Wasson’s work asks similar questions about service and professionalization. See Haidee Wasson, *Museum Movies Museum Movies: The Museum of Modern Art and the Birth of Art Cinema* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).

own *Healthcaring*, *Moonage Daydreams of Charlene Stardust* (1974), which was produced by a women's film group in Sydney, and *Amazing Equal Pay Show* (1974), made by the London Women's Film Group, although there are no income records from this period.<sup>3</sup>

From July 1978—December 1980, however, the film collection grew to include between 26 and 37 titles. Titles that stand out from this period include *Healthcaring*, Suzanne Jasper's film *Being a Prisoner* (1975), a documentary about women's experiences in a correctional facility in Brooklyn, and *Dyketactics* (1974), a landmark experimental film exploring lesbian sexuality by Barbara Hammer. In a grant application from 1978, distribution was itemized under a larger budget for providing "Support Services to Filmmakers," rather than as its own comprehensive program. Its cost was about \$4,000, or just 10% of the total budget.

The relative inattention to the finances, labor, and institutional infrastructure associated with expanding the distribution program allowed several other WMM endeavors to move forward, while distribution floundered without consistent leadership and direction—but this does not mean that it was abandoned completely. An innovative and resourceful staff member named Susan Eeningenberg worked at WMM for a short time and administered a dual component distribution and exhibition program in 1977. While at WMM, she articulated, assembled, and implemented guidelines for an impeccably organized set of distribution practices, but remained at the organization for a short time. It appears that after her departure, the guidelines and practices she established were largely disregarded—perhaps this was unintentional, but it created yet another rupture in how WMM conducted its business and articulated its role to potential users of its films and to wider independent film audiences.

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<sup>3</sup> Women Make Movies Inventory, June 23, 1978, Women Make Movies Papers.

In 1977, Eeningenberg expressed the incongruity that persisted in the realm of feminist media:

There are a wide variety of women's films available for viewing by an audience in need of them. However, there are few distributors of women's films...The few which do exist in the Northeast region such as the Women's Film Co-op of Northampton, Mass., and Pandora Films of New York City, are constrained by limited resources and have no regular show place for their products. Therefore, visibility remains low for these organizations and the information on films available is not reaching the wide audience that exists for them.<sup>4</sup>

As project director, Eeningenberg proposed an intensive research and promotion campaign to realign WMM's distribution arm with audiences who wanted access to its films. Attending conferences and important women's events in the Northeast, disseminating informational brochures, screening WMM films and holding panel discussions on women in media, and assembling mailing lists of women's organizations around the U.S. were also seen as important for the growth of the distribution program. Eeningenberg's influential work to streamline distribution and implement effective strategies for circulating films would become central to WMM's reinvention of itself in the 1980s.<sup>5</sup>

Eeningenberg's Distribution Book, which she assembled before she left WMM, laid out a four page job description for the main Distributor, as well as more than forty pages of detailed instructions for executing every aspect of distributing films: office forms, correspondence with filmmakers, invoices, shipping, booking films, print purchase agreements, lab agreements, film

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<sup>4</sup> Project Grant Application, National Endowment for the Arts, ca. January 1977, Women Make Movies Papers.

<sup>5</sup> Longtime Executive Director of WMM, Debra Zimmerman, has expressed her gratefulness that Eeningenberg's distribution guide existed, as it was enormously helpful to her when she refocused the organization's distribution program in the 1980s, and in many ways, it is still the model that persists today.

maintenance, royalties and contracts, sub-distribution, video, advertising, mailing lists and systems, promotion, reviews and endorsements, press conferences/releases/kits, promoters, producing film programs, and publicity and catalogs.<sup>6</sup> If the seemingly straightforward mission of a distribution program was to deliver films to as many audiences as possible, then Eeningenberg's guidelines spell out the intricate and labor-intensive measures involved in this mission.

She wrote the guide after resigning, so there are interesting moments in the document that reveal her view of WMM and how she understood the organization's instability. For example, while discussing the issue of acquiring films by non-WMM members for distribution, she wrote:

It won't do us any good to take on a mediocre film just to be nice to a budding filmmaker and not make a cent off it when we so desperately need to build, build, build distribution with income-producing films. So nothing was concluded during my tenure, no films added—basically because I didn't want to conclude any contracts with a filmmaker, promise them distribution and not know whether the organization would be there to back that contract up. So I would not recommend taking on new films until such time as the organization is very committed to continuing distribution for at least 3-5 years to build it up with good films.<sup>7</sup>

Eeningenberg's manual was a guide for distribution, intended for use by future staff at WMM. But in many ways the guide was also a brief history of WMM in its own right, as Eeningenberg's descriptions of the various arms of distribution incorporated numerous examples of WMM projects and ideas that had been successful, and, more frequently, those that had failed. One notable example is her discussion of Women Make Movies Presents, which was conceived as a

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<sup>6</sup> Susan Eeningenberg, Distribution Manual, January 1977, Women Make Movies Papers.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

film series that could promote the organization as a whole and the films it was trying to distribute. She wrote:

WMM Presents was a grand idea but to have been really effective it should have been planned on a grander scale—it was a bit amateurish for sophisticated New Yorkers—know your AUDIENCE. After two showings we withdrew the project because with a lot of juggling we just barely made our expenses and it was just so much effort to produce it that it just wasn't worth it. Also we picked the wrong location, women's coffee house with ornery dykes and rude ladies who did not appreciate all our efforts...One could ask why distribution would embark on this project—it's really something for the organization to do to promote its image as an organization doing media in New York City...Organizing a film series is a full time job...and I soon discovered that even our two amateur nights kept me busy and away from the essentials, more pressing distribution work.<sup>8</sup>

These comments seem to reveal tensions in feminist media work around labor, class, and sexuality, not unlike the conference survey remarks that challenged a notion of feminist cooperation, which are discussed in chapter two. As Eeningenberg expressed her frustration with having run, in her opinion, an “amateurish” event for an unappreciative audience, she also invoked a discourse of professionalization that sought to detach WMM from certain kinds of “unprofessional” community-based subcultural activities. Her compendium of distribution advice recommended acquiring professional, polished, income-generating films, and prioritizing selective acquisitions processes over community exhibition.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

Another interesting element of the guide was a focus on film promotion, as a distinct activity from advertising. Eeningenberg defines advertising as taking out ads in publications, while promotion includes any efforts that do not involve producing written materials (publicity) or taking out ads (advertising). For Eeningenberg, this included very targeted relationship-building with the kinds of audiences and markets that would use WMM films: colleges and universities, women's groups, health organizations, libraries, museums, showcase theaters, film festivals, and conferences. By 1977, educational institutions and organizations were already identified as the "biggest customers for both rentals and sales," reflecting the burgeoning fields of Film Studies and Women's Studies, the prevalence of consciousness-raising and women's groups on campuses, and the desire of some professors in other fields to bring feminist media into their classes.<sup>10</sup>

Although increasing the number of films and videos in the collection and securing greater distribution income was an immensely important goal after the success of *Healthcaring* in the late 1970s, distribution success and greater financial independence did not come overnight. WMM stayed afloat through the early 1980s from some continued support from foundations and government entities, such as the National Endowment for the Arts and the New York State Council on the Arts. Specifically, film sales and rentals accounted for 21% of WMM's total income in fiscal year 1979—1980.<sup>11</sup> Foundation and government income, however, was close to 61% of total income for that same period.<sup>12</sup> Therefore, the bulk of WMM's income that year—more than 80%—came from distribution and grant support. The remaining 20% or so came from

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<sup>10</sup> Susan Eeningenberg, Distribution Manual, January 1977, Women Make Movies Papers.

<sup>11</sup> Percentages determined from Summary of Income and Expenditures, July 1, 1979—June 30, 1980, Women Make Movies Papers.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.



workshop fees (tuition), membership dues, screenings admissions, contributions, and a small amount of unspecified “corporate income” (\$200).<sup>13</sup>

Between October 1979 and October 1981, WMM made inconsistent but meaningful efforts to expand the distribution program, which involved a few important goals. The first goal was to diversify the collection to include more lesbian, experimental, and foreign films and video, with a specific “priority on Third World women’s films.”<sup>14</sup> The second major goal involved expanding audiences by targeting additional women’s and community groups, academic and professional organizations, and specialized groups for certain films (i.e. marketing Michelle Parkerson’s film *But Then, She’s Betty Carter* to theater and jazz groups), and establishing a financial plan and promotional budget for distribution.<sup>15</sup> Near the end of 1981, it is estimated that there was a 100% increase in distribution income from the previous year.<sup>16</sup>

A formal 1980 proposal to expand and refine distribution lays out very plainly the dimensions of what WMM and other feminist media groups were up against in terms of circulating independent media in the 1970s and early 1980s. It establishes a context by outlining briefly the stereotyping of women in mainstream media, the connection between media representations of women and social patterns in society, and how few women direct mainstream films and television shows. Specifically it cites a Director’s Guild of America survey that found that the top nineteen production companies hired 26 women for directing assignments in a seven-month period, or 1.3% of all directors hired.<sup>17</sup> The proposal is worth quoting at length because

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Proposal for Distribution, October 1981, Women Make Movies Papers.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Distribution program expansion, ca. 1980, Women Make Movies Papers.

the language resonates quite strongly, in fact, with present concerns and problems about distributing independently produced media to broad audiences:

The problem of inadequate representation of women in the commercial media is compounded by the lack of sufficient channels to exhibit and distribute women's media. Primarily, the large distributors are not interested in these films because they do not appear commercially viable. Second, the filmmakers do not have the time or more important, the capital, to expand into this critical realm in order to have their films reach the widest audience possible. Thus in order to increase the quality and quantity of films by women, it is necessary to establish a viable distribution service.<sup>18</sup>

One of the more significant propositions that emerged from the 1981 distribution expansion resolutions was, once again, a clearly articulated priority to build the collection with "Third World women's films."<sup>19</sup> However, it took a few more years before commitments like this were implemented successfully.

Part of WMM's challenge in expanding a successful distribution program was that prior to 1980, there was no budget line for promotion. Without a promotional program in place that would facilitate the mailing of catalogs and printed materials to groups and institutions that had previously rented or purchased films (or otherwise have an interest in WMM's titles), it seems logical that few film orders were placed. WMM's in-house newsletter, which was compiled and distributed sporadically, sometimes included lists of film titles in circulation. For example, the March 1980 newsletter devoted one of its six pages to a list of "New WMM Releases," which included titles like Lizzie Borden's *Regrouping* (1976) and *The Yellow Wallpaper* (Marie

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

Ashton, 1977), among approximately twenty documentaries and experimental films and videos. Since the newsletter served mainly the WMM membership base and similar women's media organizations, it was not necessarily the best vehicle for promoting films titles in distribution. In July 1980, WMM sought funding support to produce a printed distribution catalog that would feature its twenty new films. These new releases also included a range of ¾" and ½" videotapes about a number of social issues, reflecting the increased use of video by community groups.

From 1978 to 1981, WMM organized screenings at El Taller Latino Americano, the Chelsea Coalition on Housing, Committee for the Visibility of the Other Black Woman, Women's Survival Space, and the Chelsea Gay Association, among other sites.<sup>20</sup> In 1980, WMM added a diverse set of films to their distribution collection, including documentaries and experimental works by Su Friedrich, Marjorie Keller, Abigail Child, and Barbara Hammer. To showcase these new acquisitions, the films were exhibited in a weekly film series over the course of a month, often with the filmmaker present to discuss her work. Filmmaker Lizzie Borden, who is now seen as a kind of icon of feminist cinema for her 1983 film *Born in Flames*, screened her first film *Regrouping* (1976) as part of WMM's "new releases" film series in May 1980.<sup>21</sup> Other films included in the series were *The Chicago Maternity Center Story* (Kartemquin Films, 1976), a film about the right to accessible health care for all women and a kind of a complementary title to WMM's own *Healthcaring*, and *Trial for Rape* (Loredana Rotondo, et al, 1979), a record of an actual rape trial which took place in Naples and was filmed and edited by a women's video collective for Italian television. Experimental feminist landmarks were part of the series too, such as the experimental narrative *Cool Hands, Warm Heart* (Su Friedrich, 1979), which was described in 1983 as a "defiantly feminist film, chronicling in rite after ritual the deep

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<sup>20</sup> Proposal for educational brochures, ca. 1980, Women Make Movies Papers.

<sup>21</sup> Press release, ca. April 1980, Women Make Movies Papers.

violence which women have accepted as part of their daily attempts to refashion their nature into the cleaned-up, pared-down image of glossy magazine mannequins.”<sup>22</sup> An evening of lesbian films included *Double Strength* (1978) and *Dyketactics* (1974) by the trailblazing lesbian feminist experimental filmmaker Barbara Hammer, an animated film about women’s spirituality by Carol Clement called *Lunatune* (1979), and Greta Schiller’s fictional film about an interracial lesbian relationship, *Greta’s Girls* (1976).

The year 1980 marked an important moment for relationship building with what would become a major partner and ally for WMM in the 1980s—the Latin American independent film community in New York and specifically El Taller Latino Americano, an arts and education organization. At El Taller, WMM hosted a screening of the documentary *El Corazón de Loisaida* (1980) by Bienvenida Matías and Marci Reaven, about Puerto Rican tenant associations fighting to improve their buildings and community on the Lower East Side.<sup>23</sup> WMM, the Taller, the Chelsea Action Center, and the Chelsea Coalition on Housing co-sponsored several community film screenings around 1980-81. Another notable screening from 1980 was called “Women in Struggle,” and featured six titles (with three from WMM) that focused on poor and working women organizing in response to issues around health care, low wages and poverty, and housing.<sup>24</sup>

Struggles to streamline distribution at the turn of the decade were exacerbated by the constant changes at the level of the staff. Personnel turnover at WMM was frequent in the late 1970s, and while this creates challenges for any company or organization, it is especially difficult in the context of non-profit collective groups. Interestingly, the instability at the level of

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<sup>22</sup> Lindley Hanlon, “Female Rage: The Films of Su Friedrich,” *Millennium Film Journal* (Spring 1983): 79.

<sup>23</sup> A few years later, Matías became a key partner in WMM’s redevelopment, which I discuss later in the chapter.

<sup>24</sup> Flier, “Women in Struggle,” July 1980, Women Make Movies Papers.

the staff was coupled with an enormous influx of new member interest in the organization—mostly white, middle-class women who wanted to take classes, or filmmakers looking for fundraising advice, support, and an audience for their films. Workshops continued to be offered fairly consistently throughout the late 1970s. Other community film and video organizations in New York, such as Global Village and the Downtown Community Television Center, operated throughout the 1970s but by the end of the decade, the youth media and community video movements had largely dissipated. But for WMM, its allegedly renewed organizational focus on distribution did not mean that the film workshops halted.<sup>25</sup> In 1977, for example, WMM still offered basic film classes (Basic Bolex, Scripting Without Words, Basic Sound, and Simple Simon Animation) and even intermediate workshops (Documentary Video, Sound, and Advanced Hands-on Camera).<sup>26</sup>

The combination of the membership's general desire to remain as a collective, a relative lack of experienced WMM members willing to lead the organization, contradictory articulated (and rearticulated) visions for how WMM should evolve, and weak institutional memory severely strained the organization as it grappled with thinking about its future. All of these tensions were deeply felt by the individuals involved as general members, staff members, or board members, and many felt that some action needed to happen to make WMM's goals and activities clearer for everyone.

Committees formed within WMM's membership (for example, fundraising, equipment, and membership), but no overall direction or large-scale leadership was in place for the membership. A basic lack of management and vaguely delegated responsibilities among staff

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<sup>25</sup> Production workshops eventually ended at WMM at the turn of the decade, though they were reincarnated into another kind of program for filmmakers, which is discussed in chapter five.

<sup>26</sup> "Female Film Forum," Clipping, December 1977, Women Make Movies Papers.

and members thus created a sense of general confusion about WMM's projects and central purpose. In June 1979, for example, members Abigail Norman and Wendy Lidell published a newsletter (which they thought was "the first WMM newsletter ever") expressing the urgent need to address the organization's priorities: "WMM's membership meetings suddenly swelled with new people expressing interest and enthusiasm, but also confusion as to what, exactly, WMM is."<sup>27</sup>

The activities taken up by the WMM's members were scattered in numerous directions—some worked on their own film projects, some hosted screenings in the community or at WMM's loft space, some formulated plans for how WMM should make decisions about supporting members' projects, some took part in larger conversations and activities of the "alternative cinema" movement, and some performed administrative duties in the office. Certainly, the WMM members were active—for example, in 1980, the New York public television station WNET became embroiled in a censorship controversy surrounding "Independent Focus," an annual series of independent films that were selected for broadcast from national submissions by a peer review panel.<sup>28</sup> Four titles that the panel chose for inclusion were rejected outright by WNET. WMM filmmaker and instructor Greta Schiller had served on the peer review panel and became involved in protests against the decision.

In addition to reenergizing a distribution program, one lasting result of *Healthcaring* was the sheer expansion of WMM's visibility on a national stage. The office received "constant requests" from women's groups, health centers, community organizations, libraries, and schools, not only for WMM's own films, but for information about accessing women's independent

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<sup>27</sup> Newsletter, June 1979, Women Make Movies Papers.

<sup>28</sup> "Independent Focus" ran on WNET and other PBS stations from 1977 through the early 1990s.

media more broadly, starting satellite WMM groups, and holding festivals.<sup>29</sup> This tendency continued to reify the notion that WMM was not only a women's independent film organization, but an emblematic one.

While varied, energetic activities and flexible conditions at WMM enabled a number of projects to develop (including attempts to strengthen and expand the distribution program), they also enabled several significant problems to go unaddressed, such as a lack of accountable leadership, unclear relationships between members of the organization, the board, and the staff, and ongoing issues around insufficient funding.

#### **4.1 CETA AND ORGANIZATIONAL (IN)STABILITY**

One promising development underway concerning WMM's finances offered a potential solution to its staffing problems. Starting in 1978, WMM secured a varying number of staff positions funded by a federal jobs program under the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (CETA).<sup>30</sup> This national program sought to bring long-term unemployed and low-income populations into the public service and non-profit sector for one or two year periods, with the larger goal of building experience and skills so that those workers could eventually secure permanent work. CETA was signed into law in 1973 under President Nixon and was renewed and expanded several times to provide millions of temporary jobs through 1982. According to the Department of Labor, CETA created four million jobs each year during President Carter's

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<sup>29</sup> Proposal for educational brochures, ca. 1980, Women Make Movies Papers.

<sup>30</sup> I say "varying" because WMM's records related to CETA positions are scattered; I name projects and individuals that were supported by CETA only when they are identified explicitly as such in the WMM Papers. It is clear WMM received some CETA support from 1978—1980; it is unclear precisely how many positions there were each year and who held those positions.

term alone and more than 90% of CETA jobs were filled by the “economically disadvantaged.”<sup>31</sup> CETA created opportunities in established institutions and local and city agencies, and it created massive and far-reaching new support structures for artists and non-profit organizations in particular. A 1977 issue of the journal *Bicentennial Arts Biweekly* claimed that around nine hundred CETA proposals were made by nonprofits that year alone, many of them smaller community-based and arts organizations.<sup>32</sup>

In New York City, the National Congress of Neighborhood Women (NCNW), a network for working class women and grassroots women’s groups founded in Brooklyn in 1969, created an umbrella coalition of women’s organizations, including WMM, to support and advance community job assistance.<sup>33</sup> Obtaining CETA grant monies for its groups became a major NCNW project. This NCNW coalition—called Project Open Doors—worked to secure CETA positions specifically in organizations run by and serving working class women in New York City, and was perhaps the first coalition of women’s groups in the U.S. to receive federal funds through CETA.<sup>34</sup> Project Open Doors involved a range of progressive women’s organizations in New York City, including Health Right, the Asian American Women’s Communication Network, the Jane Addams Center, the National Gay Task Force, New York Women Against Rape, and the Feminist Federal Credit Union.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Ray Marshall, “The Labor Department in The Carter Administration: A Summary Report — January 14, 1981,” *History at the Department of Labor*, United States Department of Labor, <http://www.dol.gov/oasam/programs/history/carter-eta.htm>.

<sup>32</sup> Cited in Arlene Goldbard, *New Creative Community: The Art of Cultural Development* (Oakland: New Village Press, 2006), 124.

<sup>33</sup> For more information on NCNW, see Tamar Carroll, “Unlikely Allies: Forging a Multiracial, Class-Based Women’s Movement in 1970s Brooklyn,” in *Feminist Coalitions: Historical Perspectives on Second Wave Feminism in the United States*, ed. Stephanie Gilmore (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2008): 196—224.

<sup>34</sup> Newsletter, June 1979, Women Make Movies Papers.

<sup>35</sup> Finding Aid, National Congress of Neighborhood Women Records, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College, Northampton, MA.



In 1978, there were at least two CETA-funded positions to teach film production workshops at WMM and produce two films—one on why battered women stay in violent homes, eventually titled *Why Women Stay* (Jacqueline McSweeney and Debra Zimmerman, 1980), and the second on older women living in New York City on low incomes, called *Well, We Are Alive* (Greta Schiller, 1979).<sup>36</sup> By early 1979, seven staff members oversaw WMM activities, including five CETA workers. Janet Benn was the executive director, Nancy Peck was a part-time bookkeeper, and five individuals held CETA positions—Caryl Ratner was Project Coordinator, Pamela Yates was Distributor, Greta Schiller and Jacqueline McSweeney were teachers and producers, and Debra Zimmerman was a Program Aide who worked with McSweeney on her film about battered women.<sup>37</sup> Starting in September 1979, the CETA-funded staff members worked on a Community Video Project, which aimed to strengthen community partnerships by developing ongoing relationships with community-based groups, bringing films and filmmakers to screenings, and helping community organizations implement media programs into their ongoing work. McSweeney and Schiller filled two positions, and the three remaining CETA in the fall of 1979 were for a distributor, program coordinator, and program aide.

The Community Film and Video Project, which WMM's CETA staff implemented in 1980, embodied several major goals that echoed those from around the time of WMM's formation a decade earlier. These program objectives were articulated in 1980:

To establish contact and forge links with Third World, labor, lesbian, and feminist groups; To educate groups about the use of social change media; To promote and showcase works of independent women film and video makers; To strengthen our

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<sup>36</sup> Newsletter, June 1979, Women Make Movies Papers.

<sup>37</sup> NYSCA Application, 1979, Women Make Movies Papers.

ties with the alternative media community; to provide a library of film and video resources; to serve the community.<sup>38</sup>

Much of the work of the project involved compiling and disseminating information for the network of organizations: directories of community groups and contacts, film and video lists, resources for equipment access and funding, and so on; public and promotional screenings were also part of the agenda.

But while CETA positions secured much-needed personnel for the organization, the short duration of their tenure necessitated constant staff turnover, which WMM struggled with already. Pamela Yates, for example, who had been working as the Distributor and promoted *Healthcaring* in the late 1970s left the organization in 1979.<sup>39</sup> Caryl Ratner, the main projects coordinator, and Barbara Glazer, a student intern, also left around that time. Lynne Carlo, Judy Oney, and Janet Benn took over as the small staff that oversaw bookkeeping and general office and administrative work to keep WMM afloat.

Despite the challenges of a constantly changing staff, an enormous sense of promise accompanied WMM's gain of CETA positions. Since pre-defined job and project descriptions were required in order to apply for CETA, the application process imposed at least a degree of order and planning at a time when WMM struggled with organization. A NYSCA application from October 1978 suggests that federal funds from CETA accounted for more than half—or about 57%—of the organization's \$119,860 total income at that time.<sup>40</sup> While this substantial percentage of federal support was welcome at the time, it was also somewhat limiting, particularly since WMM was seeking to put its energies toward its distribution program. CETA

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<sup>38</sup> CETA Staff Memo, February 4, 1980, Women Make Movies Papers.

<sup>39</sup> Today Yates is an internationally acclaimed documentary filmmaker whose work focuses on genocide, loss, war crimes, and cultural memory in Latin America and the U.S.

<sup>40</sup> Budget Outline, October 1978, Women Make Movies Papers.

money had been allocated specifically for funding production and film workshops, which meant that distribution, once again, was unsupported.

When Yates left in 1979, there was no one in charge of managing or promoting distribution. And, because WMM's members—rather than the staff—determined what the organization took on at the time, this complicated array of related but disparate activities created a paradoxical situation wherein there was a lot of activity and energy among individual members, but not much actually being accomplished in terms of sustaining the organization as a whole. Moreover, there was also a perceived tension or “power struggle between members and staff,” perhaps since the paid staff was constantly in transition and the relationship between membership and staff was unclear and precarious.<sup>41</sup>

An organizational description from 1979 asserted that WMM's “primary program” was “to provide support services in the area of film and video education, production, and distribution to our growing membership and community at large.”<sup>42</sup> However, it seems clear that executing all three programs successfully—film workshops, production, and distribution—was complex and difficult, given the constant financial strain, staff inconsistencies, and overall lack of coordination among the staff, membership, and community.

On the one hand, CETA funding provided vital financial resources that enabled WMM to carry out several successful projects involving teaching, production, and exhibition. On the other hand, the frequent staff turnover and financial crutch that accompanied the CETA positions impeded the development of a professional distribution program. Thus, the assets (political, financial, professional) gained from the film *Healthcaring* did not progress seamlessly into a

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<sup>41</sup> Notes from Staff Strategy Meeting, Oct. 1980, Women Make Movies Papers.

<sup>42</sup> NYSCA application, 1979-1980, Women Make Movies Papers.

durable model of distribution.<sup>43</sup> Furthermore, since federal CETA funds supported only staff salaries rather than general operational costs, ongoing fundraising through the National Endowment for the Arts and the New York State Council on the Arts remained a necessity.

With the completion of the two polished CETA-funded videotapes *Why Women Stay* and *Well We Are Alive*, intensive community outreach and targeted distribution for these films once again took on greater importance—these films can almost be seen as marking yet another “wave” of renewed distribution efforts at WMM several years after *Healthcaring* was completed and took on the important topics of battered and aging women. However, these achievements were thwarted once again when WMM faced a host of new financial challenges as its two greatest sources of government support were cut: CETA was phased out in 1981-82, and changes at the National Endowment for the Arts caused WMM to lose one of its major annual grants. WMM managed to stay afloat between 1981 and 1982, with the six person staff reduced to two. As if a shrunken administrative staff and strained interpersonal relations were not enough hindrances for an already struggling organization, deep ideological controversies around federal funding for the arts were already in full swing in the national discourse.

## **4.2 IDEOLOGICAL RETRENCHMENT AND “THE CULTURE WARS”**

WMM and arts organizations all around the U.S. faced immense financial challenges in the 1980s resulting from a shift in granting priorities, which itself resulted from the Reagan administration’s stance on cultural policy and the status of the endowments. Especially

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<sup>43</sup> Distribution is the program that would eventually enable WMM to remain financially solvent, and this crucial transformation is discussed later in the chapter and in chapter five.

damaging for smaller and community-based organizations that served underrepresented communities (women's groups and "minority organizations," for example) was a slew of controversies around a program called Expansion Arts, a division of the National Endowment for the Arts that had supported WMM with a substantial annual grant for several years. The changing circumstances around Expansion Arts in the early 1980s and public resources for the arts more broadly involved more than budget disputes, and were linked with large-scale ideological conflicts around funding for cultural production and particular kinds of arts organizations. Right-wing attacks on the arts at the turn of the decade amounted to a kind of code, wherein language around promoting "excellence" and "aesthetic standards" equated to suppression, at best, and censorship, at worst, of artists of color, socially critical art production, and politically engaged organizations. Brian Wallis refers to these places and practices broadly as "alternative spaces," and they were at the center of NEA battles in the 1980s.<sup>44</sup>

This moment in the 1980s marked a turning point for community arts programming that had flourished in the 1970s. The National Endowments for the Arts and Humanities (NEA and NEH) were founded by a so-called nonpartisan group of political supporters to foster and spread artistic prosperity through the U.S. After Congress passed a bill establishing the National Foundation on the Arts as an umbrella entity in 1965, President Johnson signed the National Foundation on the Arts and the Humanities Act.<sup>45</sup> The NEA's first fiscal year was 1966 with a budget of \$2.5 million, and the budget continued to grow each year through President Carter's administration; by 1977 the Endowment's budget reached \$94 million.<sup>46</sup> The NEA's own

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<sup>44</sup> See Brian Wallis, "Public Funding and Alternative Spaces," *Alternative Art New York 1965—1985*, edited by Julie Ault, Social Text Collective (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002): 161-182.

<sup>45</sup> National Endowment for the Arts, *The National Endowment for the Arts 1965—2000: A Brief Chronology of Federal Support for the Arts*, (Washington, DC: NEA, 2000), 11, <http://www.nea.gov/pub/NEAChronWeb.pdf>.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid*, 26.

history highlights the sheer range of projects the Arts Endowment supported in its earliest years, and indeed, programs and individuals in visual arts, literature, music, theater, dance, design, performance, education, opera, and beyond received the first NEA grants. Starting in 1965, the initial NEA grant recipients included regional dance companies, choreography fellowships, and the Martha Graham Dance Company; a pilot program for Poets in Schools; local and state architecture, planning, and design firms; graduates of college art programs; literary organizations and creative writers; symphony orchestras and resident professional theaters; public art programs and art museums; and public media and educational television programs.<sup>47</sup>

The diversity of the initial grant recipients, including artists and writers “then outside the mainstream,” such as Alfred Leslie, a painter and filmmaker, Grace Paley, a poet, teacher, and activist, and Tillie Olsen, a writer and feminist activist, indicated a potentially forward-thinking Arts Endowment that would “encourage young and fresh talents previously overlooked.”<sup>48</sup> But despite the perceived range of grant recipients, NEA funding, especially in the Visual Arts Program, tended to lean toward forms and artists already well established in the art world. As historian Donna M. Binkiewicz writes:

While the American visual art scene in the 1960s embraced pop, minimalist, performance, feminist, black, and Chicano arts that were more critical of American society, federal art support continued to favor old modernist forms, such as those generated by abstract expressionist and color-field artists, who had

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<sup>47</sup> Mark Bauerlein, ed., *National Endowment for the Arts: A History 1965—2008* (Washington, DC: NEA, 2008), 21, <http://www.nea.gov/pub/nea-history-1965-2008.pdf>.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid, 22.

dominated the art world in the 1950s and had earned a reputation as the best representatives of American freedom.<sup>49</sup>

However, an important milestone from the NEA's early years sought to address this institutionalized mechanism of cultural regulation with the creation of the Expansion Arts Program in 1971.<sup>50</sup>

The Expansions Arts mission "to honor the nation's cultural diversity" aimed to expand funding for arts organizations outside of the mainstream and typically Euro-centric arts establishment; it had a focused social foundation and expanded resources for small non-profit organizations, community-based arts organizations, and groups and artists of color.<sup>51</sup> To provide just a few examples of these groups, Expansion Arts grantees in fiscal year 1979 included the Jazz Development Workshop in Detroit, Buffalo Black Dance Workshop in Buffalo, Public Art Center in Chicago, and in New York City, Women Make Movies and Young Filmmakers Foundation.<sup>52</sup> The African-American poet and musician A. B. Spellman was recruited as a consultant for the NEA and joined the Expansion Arts Program in 1978. Speaking about the origins of Expansion Arts, Spellman explained, "Its purpose was to find and develop professional arts organizations that were, according to the letter of the guidelines, 'deeply rooted in and reflective of the culture of minority, inner-city, rural, and tribal communities.'"<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Donna M. Binkiewicz, *Federalizing the Muse: United States Arts Policy and the National Endowment for the Arts, 1965-1980* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 122.

<sup>50</sup> Another NEA milestone around this time particular to the realm of film included the establishment of the American Film Institute (AFI) through a special grant in 1967.

<sup>51</sup> Mark Bauerlein, ed., *National Endowment for the Arts: A History 1965—2008* (Washington, DC: NEA, 2008), 49, <http://www.nea.gov/pub/nea-history-1965-2008.pdf>.

<sup>52</sup> A.B. Spellman, "Expansion Arts," *National Endowment for the Arts 1979 Annual Report*, (Washington DC: NEA, 1980), 54—68, <http://www.nea.gov/about/AnnualReports/NEA-Annual-Report-1979.pdf>

<sup>53</sup> A. B. Spellman, quoted in Mark Bauerlein, ed., *National Endowment for the Arts: A History 1965—2008* (Washington, DC: NEA, 2008), 48, <http://www.nea.gov/pub/nea-history-1965-2008.pdf>.

In his 1979 contribution to the NEA Annual Report, Spellman discussed the creation of Expansion Arts, and stated that its first director, the prominent African-American community leader Vantile Whitfield, “succeeded in organizing the program and making its concerns clear. He identified what emerging arts organizations in low-income, blue collar, rural, and minority communities had in common. One important shared trait was that many organizations which produced art also taught it.”<sup>54</sup> Whitfield’s observation in the 1970s was important, because it drew attention to fact that Expansion Arts grants were not only supporting artists in “minority” or low-income communities, but also ongoing arts education in these communities, which would allow the recipient organizations to build broader and more sustainable institutions. While supporters of Expansion Arts argued that a history of discrimination and institutionalized racism warranted such a program to focus on underrepresented communities, a rising neoconservative movement in the U.S. was building immense opposition to arts funding in general and to Expansion Arts in particular. In a discussion of NEA’s history, historian Cynthia Koch has stated, “conservative discomfort with the endowments has existed since their founding; it first received national attention during the Reagan Administration. The real debate is not about money...there are enduring enmities between those who favor a government role in supporting our national cultural life, and those, who for a variety of reasons, do not.”<sup>55</sup>

The years around the Reagan Presidency brought numerous political conflicts around the arts to light. Before Reagan even took office, his inner councils debated the programs and policies of the NEA and NEH. As reported in the *New York Times*, the center of the debate was the strong belief that “the activities of both endowments have been profoundly compromised by

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<sup>54</sup> A.B. Spellman, “Expansion Arts,” *National Endowment for the Arts 1979 Annual Report*, (Washington DC: NEA, 1980), 51, <http://www.nea.gov/about/AnnualReports/NEA-Annual-Report-1979.pdf>

<sup>55</sup> Cynthia Koch, “The Contest for American Culture: A Leadership Case Study on The NEA and NEH Funding Crisis,” *Public Talk* [online journal] 2 (Fall 1998), <http://www.upenn.edu/pnc/ptkoch.html>.



politicization and an accompanying lowering of standards under the Carter Administration.”<sup>56</sup>

Reagan proposed alterations to the NEA and NEH policies and programming under the guise of creating more stringent standards for “professional accomplishment,” but these amounted effectively to a kind of censorship of “minority” and women’s groups: a certain brand of “high arts and professional scholarship” was meant to supplant “popularization and mass appeal.”<sup>57</sup>

In June 1981, President Reagan appointed a Presidential Task Force on the Arts, which was composed of corporate executives and leaders of establishment institutions, and not a single person of color or representative from a community or neighborhood arts organization.<sup>58</sup> One of the task force’s goals was to evaluate and improve the management of the Arts and Humanities Endowments, and actor Charlton Heston was designated as a chairman. Heston made a series of comments about the NEA’s funding of “minority arts” that instigated a protest by sixty-three black artists, scholars, and civic leaders in 1981. An article in the *Washington Post* summarized the conflict, and printed the protesters’ reaction to Heston’s comments on the Expansion Arts program:

“We are dismayed by reports that you have stated apparently without serious study, that the programs of [the National Endowments for the Arts and the Humanities] that are most active in supporting work of minority artists and scholars should be eliminated,” wrote the group, which included writer James Baldwin, actors Sidney Poitier, Cicely Tyson, James Earl Jones and Brock Peters,

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<sup>56</sup> Hilton Kramer, “Reagan Aids Discuss U.S. Role in Helping Arts and Humanities,” *The New York Times*, 11 November 1980, <http://www.proquest.com>.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> See Don Adams and Arlene Goldbard, “Neighborhood Arts Under the Reagan Regime,” *Journal of Community Action* 1.3 (1982): 14—20.

and such civic leaders as M. Carl Holman, president of the National Urban Coalition, and Benjamin Hooks, executive director of the NAACP.

“To define their work as ‘recreational,’” said the telegram, referring to a statement Heston made in a June 9 interview with The Washington Post, “and to consign their support to the Department of Health and Human Services would be literally to add insult to injury.”<sup>59</sup>

That same year, the rising Federal budget deficit resulted in a ten percent cut to the Endowments, before the Task Force imposed even further budget cuts.<sup>60</sup> Koch addresses this moment in an overview of NEA and NEH funding crises:

The Heritage Foundation report prepared at the time of Reagan’s election decried the NEA’s Expansion Arts Program (described in the endowment’s 1979 annual report as “a point of entry for developing groups that are established in and reflect the culture of minority, blue collar, rural and low-income communities”) as an example of the dilution of aesthetic standards. The NEH was lambasted for sacrificing “scholarly excellence” in favor of “political” projects that did not properly belong “in the realm of humanities.” A 1980 grant of \$199,953 to a group called the Working Women: National Association of Office Workers, which held classes and film forums on the struggle of office workers for improved conditions, was criticized as an example of the politicization of the humanities

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<sup>59</sup> Carla Hall, “Blacks Protest Heston’s View Of Minority Arts,” The Washington Post, 29 June 1981, sec. C, <http://www.proquest.com>.

<sup>60</sup> The National Endowment for the Arts 1965—2000: A Brief Chronology of Federal Support for the Arts, (Washington DC: NEA, 2000), 34, <http://www.nea.gov/pub/NEAChronWeb.pdf>

with “populist” or “social action” programs considered to have little scholarly merit.<sup>61</sup>

The group Working Women became a linchpin targeted by conservative ideologues. Notably, it is also cited in a *New York Times* editorial as an example of the kind of “artistic circus” that “undermines” the mission of the arts endowments. The editorial stated:

The N.E.H., for instance, has stretched the concept of humanistic research to pay for classes in films on the struggle of women office workers to improve their lot. The Expansion Arts Program of the N.E.A.—described as “a point of entry” to minority, blue collar and rural cultures—plainly has more political than esthetic significance. Such policies undermine the meaning of arts and humanities. They should be reversed. A report on the Endowments prepared for the Reagan Administration by the Heritage Foundation, and the recent report of the Rockefeller Foundation's Commission on the Humanities, agree: the focus should be on arts and humanities programs in the elementary and secondary schools as well as on support for leading cultural institutions. In short, de-emphasize artistic circuses, reaffirm quality and competence.<sup>62</sup>

Following this editorial in a letter to the editor, Franklin H. Williams wrote a rebuttal that underscored the repugnance of professing “aesthetic significance” to conceal institutionalized racism and discrimination:

Perhaps the Expansion Arts Program can be perceived as political insofar as it extends Federal largesse to minority, blue-collar and rural cultures—groups

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<sup>61</sup> Koch.

<sup>62</sup> Editorial. “Stop Funding Artistic Circuses,” *The New York Times*, 15 December 1980, sec. A, <http://www.proquest.com>.

historically denied access to such funding and definitely in need of “a point of entry.” To suggest that these programs therefore lack esthetic significance, quality or competence displays a total lack of understanding of minority cultures—and in fact shows the definite need for them.<sup>63</sup>

It is especially notable that the Heritage Foundation’s report cited a women’s organization, since accompanying the deterioration of Expansion Arts was a severe defunding of women’s organizations. In the eyes of government bureaucracy, feminism had become passé, and under new NEA guidelines, women’s groups were no longer eligible for funding because of the assumption that women should no longer be considered a “minority group.”<sup>64</sup> This was, of course, a strange rationale given that women were never in fact a “minority group” in the U.S., although they were certainly underrepresented in the arts. Paradoxically, this presumed minority status is what enabled women’s groups in arts and media to receive funding under Expansion Arts in the “small groups era” of the 1970s; under new guidelines created in the early 1980s, women, as a group, no longer qualified for Expansion Arts funding.

What ensued in the 1980s was nothing less than a protracted ideological battle (hence the term “culture wars”) in which a burgeoning cultural left with multiculturalist and secularist values confronted a conservative establishment advocating traditional and religious values and institutions. Of the many ways that Reagan’s Presidency heralded a new conservative climate in U.S. in the 1980s, it is clear that one of the especially notable ideological struggles involved the controversies around the arts and culture that I have just described. Scholars like Cristyn Davies,

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<sup>63</sup> Franklin H. Williams, “A Vital Focus for the Arts Endowment,” Letter to the Editor, *New York Times*, 26 January 1981, sec. A, <http://www.proquest.com>.

<sup>64</sup> I have been unable to locate internal NEA documents that connect the changing NEA guidelines and women’s groups specifically, but Zimmerman states this frequently and there is evidence that speaks to this link in WMM’s own materials; see WMM Board Welcome Packet, ca. 1987, Women Make Movies Papers.

have read the 1980s controversies around the arts as “moral panics, manufactured by special interest groups and the media, about the representation of alternative understandings of issues from gender and sexuality to ethnicity and religion.”<sup>65</sup> If we view the 1980s U.S. culture wars as a series of conflicts following the changes instigated by discourses of feminism and multiculturalism, then anti-establishment art, artists, and arts organizations that supported critical representations were especially threatened.

The Expansion Arts division of the NEA was phased out, but specific dates and information about the deterioration of Expansion Arts in the 1980s and 1990s are murky. For example, a history of African American theaters in the U.S. claims that during the Reagan presidency Expansion Arts was abolished while the NEA as a whole “survived the knife.”<sup>66</sup> What is clear is that its budget was reduced in half in 1981, and while the NEA’s self-produced history claims that former Expansion Arts grantees became “absorbed” into other NEA funding divisions (i.e. dance, theater, etc.), Expansion Arts was still marked as its own distinct division as late as 1994, when it distributed more than \$5 million in 320 awards (or about 3.9% of its \$135 million budget).<sup>67</sup>

In sum, the slow elimination of Expansion Arts at the NEA, and the large-scale termination of CETA positions affected scores of smaller and community-based organizations all around the U.S. that worked with underrepresented groups in a variety of arts programming, which included feminist coalitions and women’s groups like WMM. Other groups that had also survived in the 1970s by making use of Expansion Arts and CETA support lost most of their

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<sup>65</sup> Cristyn Davies, “Proliferating Panic: Regulating Representations of Sex and Gender during the Culture Wars,” in *Cultural Studies Review* 14.2 (2008): 83—102; 89.

<sup>66</sup> See Errol G. Hill and James Vernon Hatch, *A History of African American Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004): 430.

<sup>67</sup> National Endowment for the Arts FY1994 Annual Report, (Washington DC: NEA, 1994), 15.

funding, such as Visual Communications in Los Angeles, an Asian American media arts collective that combined production, exhibition, and advocacy, or Neighborhood Arts Center in Atlanta, an African American art center and cultural hub.<sup>68</sup> A number of small regional organizations around the country suffered immensely when Expansion Arts grants were reduced because they were still developing organizations, such as African American theaters like the McCree Theatre in Flint, MI and the Inner City Cultural Center in Los Angeles, and the multiracial dance company “Reach Out” in San Francisco.<sup>69</sup> WMM, which could certainly be seen as “developing” institutionally through the early 1980s, faced a crisis in the midst of these drastic changes in its funding.

#### 4.3 MOVING THROUGH CRISIS: WMM RESTRUCTURES

A sequence of events between 1980—83 helped establish WMM as the professional feminist distribution organization that film scholars and programmers see it as today. But the processes of professionalizing and institutionalizing did not come easily or without ideological baggage. In this section, I explore further the seeds of WMM’s current distribution program, and the convergence of factors—perhaps most strikingly, financial insolvency and vacated staff positions—that pressured WMM finally to restructure.

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<sup>68</sup> See Stephen Gong, “A History in Progress: Asian American Media Arts Centers, 1970—1990,” in *Screening Asian Americans*, ed. Peter X. Feng (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2002): 101—110; and James Smethurst, “Retraining the Heartworks: Women in Atlanta’s Black Arts Movement,” *Want to Start a Revolution? Radical Women in the Black Freedom Struggle*, eds. Dayo F. Gore, Jeanne Theoharis, and Komozi Woodard (New York: New York University Press, 2009): 205—222.

<sup>69</sup> See Errol G. Hill and James Vernon Hatch, *A History of African American Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); *Moving Toward Life: Five Decades of Transformational Dance*, ed. Rachel Kaplan, (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1995);

Several shifts at WMM in the early 1980s indicated a concerted effort to bring attention to women's films from a range of countries. Despite the loss of CETA staff positions, the generally scattered membership activities, and the Board's nebulous relationship to the rest of the organization, a small core at WMM managed to keep the organization operating and organized two impressive international festivals. An Independent Women's Film Festival, which WMM organized in New York City in 1981, featured international perspectives to "illuminate the commonality and diversity of women's lives, while illustrating the influences of national origin, culture, and politics on film form and content."<sup>70</sup> Among the programmers for this festival were the leading feminist art critic Lucy Lippard (who at the time co-edited the feminist art journal *Heresies*), and Third World Newsreel film programmer Pearl Bowser. While Lippard and Bowser's expertise and notoriety accorded a general sense of prestige and professionalism to WMM's conference, their involvement was significant also for the way that each symbolized the different facets of WMM's ideological engagement: activism and theory. On the one hand, Bowser's association with Third World Newsreel harkened to WMM's idealistic origins, in which the radical model of self-made media production and alternative exhibition were seen as important for building social movements. On the other hand, Lippard's affiliation with theory and the academy signaled an important juncture when WMM sought to build a film collection linked to scholarship and feminist theory in the university.

Language in WMM's earlier proposals for funding and programming events often resonated with the emerging ideas in feminist film theory, using terminology like "conditioned," "codes," and "powerful" to talk generally about women as spectators and women on the screen. But the language in the 1981 film festival proposal spelled out that the "ongoing search for new

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<sup>70</sup> Women's Film Festival Overview, ca. 1980, Women Make Movies Papers.

cinematic forms in the context of current ideas in feminist film theory” was one of the unique features of this festival in particular.<sup>71</sup> In other words, WMM and the selection committee envisioned this festival as not just another festival of films by women, but one that marked out how cinema was responding to and influencing the burgeoning field of feminist theory. The long term goal of the showcase of films was to catalyze a feminist film conference in the U.S. the following year, and a number of supporters wrote letters for WMM to help secure funding, including B. Ruby Rich, who was a professor at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago at the time; Jane Morrison, the President of Association of Independent Video and Filmmakers (AIVF); Frances Reid, President of Iris Feminist Collective, Julia Reichert, from New Day Films Collective; and Freude Bartlett, distributor at Serious Business.

The 1981 Festival at Bleecker Street Cinema presented a number of films that were significant for various reasons: *Je, Tu, Il, Elle* (Chantal Ackerman, 1976) became a canonical film for exploring desire, lesbianism, and feminist film theory, *Kaddu Beykat* (Safi Faye, 1976) was the first film by a Senegalese women to be distributed commercially and internationally, and *Susana* (Susana Muñoz, 1980) and *After the Earthquake* (Lourdes Portillo, 1979) were films about Latin American women that would become critical for WMM’s transformation a few years later.<sup>72</sup> The Bleecker Street Festival was so successful and well attended that the following year’s festival was organized at the larger venue Film Forum. In 1982, WMM put on another international festival at Film Forum, which included titles by women filmmakers from Canada, Italy, Holland, Germany, Hong Kong, Brazil, and elsewhere.<sup>73</sup> But while these festivals required a lot of organizing labor on the part of the staff, they did not return much profit to WMM,

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> 1981 Festival Program, June 1981, Women Make Movies Papers.

<sup>73</sup> 1982 Women’s Independent film Festival Program, May 1982, Women Make Movies Papers.



particularly the Film Forum festival, which was not as successful as the program from the year before. This exacerbated what was already a period of financial hardship and strain between the small staff of the organization and its Board, which disagreed with the way the staff was using its time and allocating resources. The time needed to organize the festivals turned the focus away from developing distribution and fundraising for the organization, even though the festivals accorded a more professional image to WMM, which was likely intended to help it secure additional NYSCA funding.

A number of membership and Board documents from 1979-81 express dissatisfaction and frustration with the unclear power structures and divisions between the various constituencies: the staff, membership, and Board. Recommendations to establish guidelines were made by various groups at many meetings, but the three bodies remained rather amorphously linked through 1982. Part of the struggle with streamlining the various bodies involved a general disagreement about what WMM's goals and long term plan should be: "a service organization or an advocacy group for feminist media...Many of the members may want to sacrifice services in order to 'serve' higher goals...the organization should facilitate access of media makers and users."<sup>74</sup> Put differently, an overarching ideological divide between a commitment to remaining a community educational and activist collective and a commitment to restructuring and becoming a professionalized arts organization cleaved WMM at the level of the individuals involved (staff, members, and Board) and at the structural level, to the point that the same conversations about needing to reorganize, prioritize distribution, and establish institutional procedures and guidelines repeated themselves constantly for several years.

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<sup>74</sup> Membership meeting notes, 22 October 1980, Women Make Movies Papers.

Eventually, the Board put Director Amy Chen on probation, but a week later, in November 1982, Chen accused the organization of racial discrimination and she and the other two part-time staff members resigned. While some members of the Board felt dissatisfied with the staff's performance, its inability to secure funding or attend to developing distribution and membership, other Board members wanted to stand by the women of color that had made up the small staff. The split on the Board was harmful, as was the animosity of the ex-staff members, who left WMM and tried to start up their own company called Second Decade Films.<sup>75</sup> They even pursued WMM filmmakers like Lizzie Borden and Michelle Parkerson to try to convince them to switch distribution companies.<sup>76</sup>

This was a moment when WMM could have surely folded for good—it had lost all of its funding, its staff had left to set up a competing company, and it faced charges of racism at odds with its institutional image and goals. Zimmerman describes it as a moment when “WMM just about fell apart.”<sup>77</sup> Members of the organization and Board phoned one another to set up a series of community meetings to brainstorm possible futures for WMM. These various open meetings were held in the winter to explore the feasibility of surviving, and volunteers from the Board helped keep the office running sporadically. A Board member, Lydia Pilcher, contacted the shipping company used for distribution and calculated that WMM could stay open on a most basic level on the distribution income if no salaries were paid (hence the Board volunteered temporarily).<sup>78</sup> From 1982-83, WMM was once again in transition, although in this instance the

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<sup>75</sup> Second Decade did not receive a second year of funding support and fell apart rather quickly, although its presence created difficult challenges for WMM as it tried to get back on its own feet.

<sup>76</sup> Zimmerman often credits Parkerson with immense courage for standing by WMM at such a difficult time, and really ensuring that WMM would remain viable as a distributor.

<sup>77</sup> Aufderheide, Patricia and Debra Zimmerman, “From A to Z: A Conversation on Women’s Filmmaking,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 30, no. 1 (2004): 1455-72.

<sup>78</sup> Ariel Dougherty Papers, 1946-1993, Board Report, ca. 1987; MC 589, folder 14.10.

remaining members of the organization and Board were forced to reconsider WMM's purposes and structure alongside the new political climate of government grants.

In 1982, the *Journal of Community Action* published an overview of the arts policy shifts instigated by the Reagan administration and an informal analysis of the impact on four representative community arts organizations. The report suggested that while unemployment was already endemic in creative fields and neighborhood arts groups, Reagan's policies, which favored corporate sponsorship of establishment institutions, worsened it.<sup>79</sup> Since CETA jobs had been a predominant source of support for community arts organizations, those groups already faced a major setback when the positions were eliminated. Exacerbating the financial and staffing problems facing community organizations after CETA's termination, Reagan's cuts and policies in fact "reversed the expansion" of neighborhood arts that had flourished throughout the 1970s.<sup>80</sup> In response to these government changes and larger economic fluctuations, many groups shifted their focus from "innovation and expansion to maintenance and survival," as stated in the report, fearing cutbacks and responding to "funders' fascination with 'institutionalization.'"<sup>81</sup>

The processes of institutionalization hinge on making certain kinds of compromises, and at this moment in U.S. history, those compromises involved conforming to a certain kind of professionalized model of arts administration in order to secure funding support. The report cautioned, "Groups more concerned with administrative systems than with their cultural work are likely to end up with a safe and boring product, and an audience quite different from those

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<sup>79</sup> Don Adams and Arlene Goldbard, "Neighborhood Arts Under the Reagan Regime," *Journal of Community Action* 1.3 (1982): 18.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

they intended to reach.”<sup>82</sup> NYSCA, for example, had granted funds to WMM specifically for concentrating on distribution even despite their requests for funding other activities, and informed them that their organizational structure was too dispersed and unreliable for ongoing funding.<sup>83</sup>

Institutionalization at WMM, however, did not necessarily translate into proffering “safe and boring products.” Rather, I would suggest that WMM maneuvered around and negotiated between a set of tensions surrounding the transformations in feminism, politics, the arts community, and the economy. These processes involved a coalescence of tendencies in the early 1980s: the decline of “neighborhood” and “community-centered” organizations, the debates about realist aesthetics in feminist film theory, the changes in feminism and the promotion of multiculturalism in public discourse and education, and the rise of Reaganism and a severely constricted political economy for the arts. WMM recognized that its original structure as a community-based media education center with a distribution program as a related (but not primary) activity was simply no longer a viable model.

Interestingly, some film organizations feared that the advent of video with its ease of duplication would demolish their role as distributors, and shut down preemptively before being forced out of business. Freude Bartlett elected to close down her Serious Business Company in California, for example, in 1983, and Iris Film Collective decided to go out of the distribution business around the same time.<sup>84</sup> As these organizations went out of business, they transferred some of their titles to WMM, which had decided it would persevere in distribution despite the perceived threat of video. These acquisitions became really important for building WMM’s

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<sup>82</sup> Ibid, 19.

<sup>83</sup> Membership Minutes, October 1980, Women Make Movies Papers.

<sup>84</sup> When Serious Business (and other distributors) closed down in the 1980s, WMM was able to acquire some of their film titles.

collection in the 1980s: Sally Potter's *Thriller* (1979) from Bartlett, and Michelle Citron's *Daughter Rite* (1979) and the documentary about lesbian parenting, *In the Best Interests of the Children* (Frances Reid, Liz Stevens, and Kathy Zeutlin, 1977) from Iris Film Collective, among other titles. About this particular moment, Zimmerman has said:

When these [two] organizations went under in the 1980s shortly after the advent of video (which, believe it or not, most of us then believed would jeopardize distribution of independent film because of its ability to be duplicated), both [organizations] assisted WMM to grow by giving us films, mailing lists, and other resources. It was as if we were being passed the baton to continue being part of the cultural arm of feminism.<sup>85</sup>

I surmise that WMM apprehended also that it was particularly well suited to meet the needs of the flourishing realm of academic feminism, providing feminist films from around the world to North American feminist scholars. Consciousness-raising and community-based media education may have gone out of fashion by the early 1980s, but feminist theory was building and evolving in literature, film and media studies, and elsewhere in the university. By tethering itself to a certain kind of Anglo-American academic feminism, WMM solidified its status as a preeminent resource and leader in feminist media in the U.S.

After director Amy Chen and the rest of the WMM staff quit in 1982, Lydia Pilcher and Debra Zimmerman ran the office on a voluntary basis in the evenings after their regular day jobs. They promoted Suzanne Jasper's film *Being a Prisoner* through a mailing list that Zimmerman had acquired from her day job at a foundation. This went on for approximately six months, at which point Zimmerman says she earned \$50 per week, half of which was deferred until a

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<sup>85</sup> See Patricia Aufderheide and Debra Zimmerman, "From A to Z: A Conversation on Women's Filmmaking," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 30, no. 1 (2004): 1455-72.

NYSCA grant came through. Pilcher was Acting Distributor during this time in early 1983 and wrote to the filmmakers whose works were then distributed by WMM to keep them abreast of the administrative transitions. In a letter from January 1983, Pilcher informed the group of filmmakers that, “while Distribution is an indispensable service to the women’s community, certain films may require subsidy to enable them to reach their audiences.”<sup>86</sup> Her letter continued:

Over the next few months, an evaluation of our distribution program will be made on the basis of 1) the importance of providing a distribution service of women’s films and video tapes that might not otherwise find a distributor; and 2) the financial realities of the business of distribution given the current political climate and the state of the economy. With hearty spirits, we are working to continue WMM’s ten-year legacy.<sup>87</sup>

Reflecting the anxieties felt by numerous arts organizations at the time during escalating ideological conflicts in the public sphere and NEA/NEH funding controversies, Pilcher’s letter indicates the intense pressures felt by those individuals who were trying to keep WMM afloat at a precarious moment. However, WMM’s difficulties were not only a matter of funding; a convergence of factors fueled a tumultuous situation for the small, persistent core of remaining WMM advocates to navigate. First, there was a troubling sense of interpersonal strife following the former staff’s conflicts with the Board and their subsequent resignation; second, there was severe financial distress given the cuts at the NEA and WMM’s own lack of stable financial infrastructure outside of grantwriting. But third, there was also a desire to remain resolutely committed to WMM’s legacy (as Pilcher put it), by advocating for women’s independent media

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<sup>86</sup> Lydia Pilcher, letter to Film and Video-makers, January 3, 1983, Women Make Movies Papers.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

production and distribution in a national arts climate that was increasingly hostile toward alternative visions and suppressed multicultural and critical art works and organizations.

Echoing commitments made at other moments of crisis (in 1975 and 1980), WMM once again reoriented itself toward distribution—not only as a way of realizing its broader mission to support women’s independent film, but also as the most certain way of securing funding outside the precarious networks of the NEA and other government agencies. When Zimmerman came back to WMM as director in 1983, building the distribution catalogue was thus viewed as the pressing priority of the moment, as was promoting those films diligently. Ironically, WMM was so strapped for cash, that in order to do this, it needed financial support to get started. With renewed energy and determination to make WMM’s distribution service successful, Zimmerman wrote grant proposals to secure support. One from around 1983 underscored firmly that developing the distribution program would be a solid way for the organization to become more sustainable and less reliant on foundation support:

With the dismantling of CETA and changes in the guidelines of NEA’s Expansion Arts program, WMM has had to face major budget cuts and seek new sources of income. However, unlike many other non-profit organizations in similar situations, Women Makes Movies’ budget has always included a large portion of earned revenues through our Distribution service....We are seeking \$10,000 for the Distribution Service in order to research and acquire new films and tapes; pay for rising laboratory costs; acquire and computerize our mailing lists; and design, print, and mail our new brochures on selected topics.<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> Grant proposal, ca. 1983, compiled by Debra Zimmerman, Women Make Movies Papers.

Despite the disorganization and instability from 1982-83, Zimmerman, Pilcher, and a new dedicated Board helped WMM keep its doors open at a most basic level: more than seven hundred requests for information and referrals by mail and phone were logged during that fiscal year. WMM may have been dealing with rather serious institutional crises, but it was still seen as an important resource for women's independent media in the U.S. Further, the impetus for redeveloping the distribution program went beyond a basic need for steady income—there was plenty of evidence that many schools, libraries, community groups, and other institutions were looking for the kinds of films WMM already circulated—films on women and healthcare, rape, prison, lesbian relationships and parenting, and domestic abuse, to name just a few subject areas. In that same fiscal year, more than three hundred organizations rented or purchased films from WMM's collection, including local institutions such as the New York Department of Cultural Affairs and Manhattan Community College (and many other universities and colleges around the U.S.), media organizations such as Satellite Video Exchange in Canada, health and community organizations such as Whitman County Mental Health Center in Washington and Tucson Center for Women and Children, and even the National Film Library of Australia.<sup>89</sup> That WMM received this amount of distribution business at a time when it was still struggling to make concerted efforts in that direction testifies to the real, concrete need that WMM filled as a source for independent media by women.

A \$5,000 grant from NYSCA specifically allocated for developing distribution allowed Zimmerman to further the program significantly in her first year as director. B. Ruby Rich, who directed the Film Program at NYSCA at the time, admits (with good humor) to defunding and then renewing WMM's grants during this moment of transition:

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<sup>89</sup> Partial listing of purchasers and renters of WMM's films and tapes, 1982—1983, ca. 1983, Women Make Movies Papers.



What can I say? I canceled their funding!...My action resulted in an emergency meeting with WMM at which I first met the young Debbie Zimmerman, introduced as the person who would turn things around at the organization. Her plan was to make WMM a distribution company for women's films. She was a force that could not be denied: soon enough, she filed a distribution plan, and the next year I happily revived funding to WMM.<sup>90</sup>

At the same time, there was no funding for operating the workshops, so Board members taught classes voluntarily. Screenings with community partners, such as Central Hall Gallery and Womanews, continued through 1984, and while they did not bring in much money, they helped WMM maintain visibility as a distributor. The following tendencies continued from 1983—1985: increasing success and interest in the broadening distribution program, and dwindling interest in and attendance at workshops. Grants from NYSCA in film and media continued to support distribution expansion, which allowed WMM to produce specialized film brochures—one focused on artists and animators and one on new directions in women's cinema. WMM membership, the amorphous division that ebbed and flowed from the late 1970s through the early 1980s, finally seemed to be coalescing around one particular concern—women filmmakers needed fundraising support to begin or complete their projects, and a fundraising workshop held at WMM in 1984 was the only well attended workshop.<sup>91</sup> The paradigm of a membership block slowly merged with the small fiscal conduit program, which existed to help filmmakers to raise money for their films through the non-profit status of WMM, and thus forged the model of filmmaker support that still exists today (this program is discussed in the next chapter as well).

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<sup>90</sup> B. Ruby Rich, "The Confidence Game," *Camera Obscura* 82, vol. 28 (2013): 159.

<sup>91</sup> Report to the Board, 1986, Women Make Movies Papers.

Expanding a distribution program necessitates, of course, acquiring additional film titles, and strategizing how to market those titles. In 1982, WMM conducted a study to analyze the needs of women's media programmers—in other words, their customer base. Four subjects emerged as target areas—health issues, older women, sexuality, and minority women—and these areas drove acquisitions decisions through the mid-1980s.<sup>92</sup> Reflecting the 1980s focus on video, WMM added twelve video titles in 1983, including the films *Labor More Than Once* (Liz Mersky, 1983), a documentary about a lesbian mother's struggle for parental rights, *The Disabled Women's Theatre Project* (Disabled Women's Theatre Project Members, 1982), which documents a stage production by women with physical disabilities and challenges societal attitudes about disabled women, and *Abuelitas de Ombligo* (Rachel Field and Jackie Reiter, 1983), about grandmother midwives in Nicaragua.<sup>93</sup>

Concurrent with efforts to acquire new titles in targeted areas in 1983-84, WMM put into practice newer and more extensive promotional strategies. The same 1982 distribution study that helped WMM develop specific subject areas for acquiring new titles revealed also that highly targeted mailings were the most effective and efficient way to promote new films; this would include, for example, printing a brochure of WMM's health related titles and mailing them to women's health groups, clinics, community health organizations, and so on.<sup>94</sup> In 1983 alone, WMM added over six thousand names to its permanent mailing list, and from 1982-3, it mailed four different sets of promotional flyers and brochures in specific areas to approximately fourteen thousand groups and individuals.<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> Grant proposal, ca. 1983, compiled by Debra Zimmerman, Women Make Movies Papers.

<sup>93</sup> Film Catalog, 1983, Women Make Movies Papers.

<sup>94</sup> Grant proposal, ca. 1983, compiled by Debra Zimmerman, Women Make Movies Papers.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

One of the earliest sets of film acquisitions selected by Zimmerman included works by experimental video art by Doris Chase, and WMM printed a five-page catalog spread, designed by Board member Carol Clement, to feature Chase's videos prominently. Chase was a famous visual artist and performer and Zimmerman met with her in New York's infamous Chelsea Hotel to convince her that WMM was an excellent home for "Doris Chase Concepts" (1980-83), a series of eight video collaborations with women dancers, poets, actresses, and performers working in the context of off-Broadway theater in New York. At its core, Doris Chase Concepts is a record of artistic performances. But Chase's skills in the medium of video, using special effects, editing, and synthesized images, created films that also celebrated cinematic possibilities. As the catalog described it, Chase's "mastery of video" adds "another dimension of visual and experiential depth to the performances of these accomplished women."<sup>96</sup> The collection included the following titles, each edited and directed by Chase and featuring a different actress or performer: *Window*, *Glass Curtain*, *Mask*, *Skyfish*, *Electra Tries to Speak*, *Lies*, *Travels in the Combat Zone*, and *Three Story Suite*. "Concepts" was screened at the Women's International Festival of Film and Video in Vancouver and a number of other venues in Montreal, Milan, and Edinburgh; and WNYC-TV in New York City broadcast the series in its entirety.<sup>97</sup>

Best described as innovative video representations of exploratory, feminist theatrical performances, Chase's series of thirty-minute films dramatizes poetry, cultural myths, feminist folktales, Greek tragedy, the subconscious mind, memory, and language—while focusing on issues facing contemporary women, such as independence, aging, and sexism in everyday life. The film *Mask*, for example, written by the American-British author, playwright, and critic Bonnie Greer, is described as depicting "the odyssey of a young black woman, unraveling her

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<sup>96</sup> "Doris Chase Concepts," Catalog, 1983, Women Make Movies Papers.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

history and discovering her true identity.”<sup>98</sup> The literal mask in the film is the African American actress’s painted face, which “returns hauntingly throughout the narrative and hints at her buried rage;” the description continues, “the stunning performance of Pat Patton, combined with dance and poetry, explores the myth and reality of black women’s lives.”<sup>99</sup> Indeed, Patton is the only figure in the film, which consists of various close-ups of her face and long shots of her body as she reads Greer’s poem and performs graceful, slow, and fluid movements in an empty black space. Chase uses various special effects in the video to visually juxtapose these two elements—the spoken poetry and the physical movements—frequently superimposing a close up of Patton’s masked face reciting the poem, with a long shot of her dance or movement. At one moment, for example, we see a close up of her face screen-left, and a medium shot of her body screen-right, while the actress says “I drew a self-portrait on white paper and I did not color it in.” Another poignant moment in the film involves close ups of her painted face juxtaposed with a long shot of her dance-like performance, which becomes more energetic and expressive as the film progresses. She says in this moment, “And if women are slaves and I the descendent of slaves I’m a special slave. Who will be my deliverer?”

Bringing Chase’s films to WMM was a significant moment for a few reasons. First, many of the films in the series portrayed women of color, as feminist theory in the 1980s was refocusing itself around more expansive understandings of difference, including race, class, ethnicity, and sexuality. Second, it also presented WMM as a kind of forward-thinking organization that supported more experimental film and video art. Third, these films were deeply resonant with the multicultural discourses of the time, which made them attractive in the educational market that WMM was targeting. Three other larger but related endeavors from the

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<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

mid-to-late 1980s also helped build WMM's collection at this transitional time, and they developed WMM's relationship to the university: special programs called "Punto de Vista: Latina," "New Directions," and "Changing the Subject."

Acquiring *Abuelitas*, a title mentioned above, was part of a larger initiative to build a special collection of films focusing on Latin American women and Latinas in the U.S. Initiated in 1983, the project came together over the course of two years of research and consultation with a number of filmmakers, programmers, organizations, and scholars. The final product—called Punto de Vista: Latina—came to represent a pivotal juncture in WMM's continual processes of reinvention in the 1980s. Visual Anthropology professor Rachel Field, who was involved with WMM in the late 1970s, made *Abuelitas* with British filmmaker Jackie Reiter, and served on the advisory board for Punto de Vista: Latina (Point of View: Latina, henceforth PDV:L) to assist with the research and acquisitions process. In a letter of support used for fundraising purposes, Field highlighted the potential of the collection:

Not only is Latin America more pivotal to issues here in the U.S.—given both foreign policy conflicts and the rapidly increasing Latin American population in the United States—but *women* within Latin America have been coming increasingly into their/our own. The organization of women on the grassroots level, the development of women's organizations and the emergence of women's rights and Women's Studies as legitimate concerns all testify to important developments for the status of women in Latin America. Punto de Vista: Latina will help to reinforce this progress.<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> Rachel Field, Letter to Debra Zimmerman, 18 April 1984, Women Make Movies Papers.

Zimmerman sought to build WMM's collection with a wider set of approaches to feminist filmmaking, and PDV:L was one of the first sets of films to solidify WMM's distribution program as one that reflected an expansive, diverse circle of women filmmakers. In a completion grant proposal, the goals of the collection were described thusly: "to present positive and inspiring images of Latina women, explore the social and historical context of the countries in which they were produced, provoke thought and discussion about the role of Latina women in society, and provide examples of how Latina women are exploring new cinematic styles and formats."<sup>101</sup> The three key branches of the project were distribution, exhibition, and education. While the films selected for the collection certainly comprised the heart of PDV:L, there were two other important components of the project: (1) a series of free/low-cost screenings held in community centers in Hispanic neighborhoods in New York City, and screenings at other New York institutions including a film festival at Taller Latinoamericano and a forum at the American Museum of Natural History, and (2) the publication of a comprehensive PDV:L "Study Guide," which was funded in part by the New York State Council on the Humanities and was made available to educational customers and organizations interested in teaching films in the collection or using a PDV:L film as part of their own programming.

To build the collection and develop its associated materials and events, Zimmerman reached out to Catherine Benamou, then a graduate student at New York University and an independent programmer of Latin American films, and Bienvenida (Beni) Matías, then an independent filmmaker in New York City, to help select and distribute works that would

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<sup>101</sup> Grant Prospectus for the New York Council for the Humanities, ca. May 1984, Women Make Movies Papers.

represent a range of Latina and Latin American women's perspectives.<sup>102</sup> Matías served as program director, and along with Benamou and Zimmerman developed a collection of films and materials and a series of community screenings. As PDV:L progressed, five more women came to the project's advisory committee as "scholar/advisors:" Sonia Rivera, Dr. Electra Arenal, Maria Elaine Cobos, Celia Alvarez, and Palmira Rios. Their role was to consult on the exhibition component of the program, facilitate the screenings and discussions, and use their expertise in issues facing women in Latin America to shape the overall development and implementation of the project. The advisory committee also forged a link between grassroots community organizers around New York City and the academic arena.

Writing to Zimmerman in 1984, Matías explained the excitement and energy building around the project:

Each time I call a Latina, whether it's a scholar like Alecta Arenal or someone involved with film like Blanca Vasquez, "Punto de Vista: Latina" creates an immediate high energy level I have seldom encountered before in my years of filmmaking and community work...I feel that although they are all active in many different areas, they see the idea of working on PDV:L as an incredible opportunity to share their knowledge with each other and see the results of their meeting transformed into valuable positive work.<sup>103</sup>

The original film and video series included fifteen documentary, narrative, and short films from women filmmakers from Costa Rica, Chile, Colombia, Peru, Mexico, Nicaragua, and the U.S. Positioned as a pedagogical project to bring Latina and Latin American women's experiences to

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<sup>102</sup> Matías was also yet another filmmaker who had worked with Young Filmmakers Foundation. Also see Benamou and Matías' recent reflection on this moment: Catherine L. Benamou and Bienvenida Matías. "Remembering 'Punto de Vista: Latina' in Two Voices," *Camera Obscura* 82, vol. 28 (2013): 135-145.

<sup>103</sup> Beni Matías, Letter to Debra Zimmerman, 30 May 1984, Women Make Movies Papers.

North American viewers, the films in the collection situated stories dealing with gender roles, health issues, socio-economic struggle, and community efforts in specific historical contexts and cultural traditions. Scholar Julia Lesage provided a quote for the special WMM catalog and wrote: “It is a new kind of feminist perspective that the works in Punto de Vista: Latina have to teach women in North American and Europe.”<sup>104</sup>

In a recent reflection on PDV:L, Benamou writes:

In retrospect, the physical location of WMM as a feminist film organization within the larger space occupied by the Taller had meaningful implications for our fledgling agenda. From the very beginning, we defined our mission as hemispheric in scope, and chose to include both fictional and documentary works by women filmmakers working both in the US (*boricuas, cubanas, dominicanas, Chicanas, and sudamericanas*) and in Latin America. Some of these directors, such as Maria Novaro (Mexico) and Valeria Sarmiento (Chile/France), had limited contact with the US at that time. Other directors, such as Chicana documentary makers Lourdes Portillo (San Francisco) and Sylvia Morales (Los Angeles) had yet to establish a presence in New York City.<sup>105</sup>

Some of the PDV:L films had already received international acclaim: *Mujeres Del Planta* (Maria Barea, 1982) won the Silver Dove at the Leipzig Film Festival in Germany, *Filmeon Y La Gorda* (Paulina Ponce, 1984) screened at Films des Femmes in Sceaux, France, and *El Hombre, Cuando es Hombre* (Valeria Sarmiento, 1982) screened at several festivals in Europe.<sup>106</sup> In terms of content, a wide range of subject matter was covered in the original fifteen PDV:L titles,

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<sup>104</sup> Punto de Vista: Latina Catalog, 1985, Women Make Movies Papers.

<sup>105</sup> Catherine L. Benamou and Bienvenida Matías. “Remembering ‘Punto de Vista: Latina’ in Two Voices,” *Camera Obscura* 82, vol. 28 (2013): 138.

<sup>106</sup> Punto de Vista: Latina overview, ca. 1985, Women Make Movies Papers.



and the collection grew through the mid-80s to integrate new titles continually. The “stylistically imaginative” documentary from Costa Rica and Chile, *El Hombre, Cuando es Hombre*, for example, explores how the concept of “machismo” functions in the social climate of Latin American countries.<sup>107</sup>

Some of the films focused on portraits of individuals to illuminate larger social and cultural issues. For example, Lourdes Portillo’s film *After the Earthquake* (1979) dramatizes the experiences of a young Nicaraguan immigrant as she navigates the challenges of adjusting to her new life in the U.S., while *Susana* (Susana Blaustein Muñoz, 1980) explores family relationships, lesbian identity, and homophobia in Latin America through an autobiographical portrait of a young Argentine lesbian. PDV:L also attempted to shed light on the effects of U.S. interventions in Latin America, most notably in the short *For a Woman in El Salvador, Speaking* (Sara Halprin, 1985) which was made for the Women’s Association of El Salvador (AMES) and featured interwoven music, art, and poetry, and in *Tell Them For Us* (Jane Lurie and Joan Braderman, 1985), filmed in Nicaragua by American filmmakers to communicate the effects U.S. contras attacks had on individual women.

*Tell Them For Us* was not the only film in the collection that was made by North American filmmakers. The catalog described a film called *The Confrontation: Latinas Fight Back Against Rape* (Anne Irving, 1983) as “an empowering representation of women,” although it was “not directed by a Latina.” In a dramatic narrative, a Latina woman deals with the aftermath of being raped, and after reporting to the police proves unhelpful, her infuriated friends and community come together to confront the rapist in a nonviolent action at his place of work. The group of women surprises the rapist in his office, surround him in front of his colleagues,

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<sup>107</sup> Punto de Vista: Latina Catalog, 1985, Women Make Movies Papers.

and inform him that they plan to reach him “on another level.” They tell him “You’re accountable for what you do and we expect you to change the way you relate to women...What do you think you’re some white dude that has property rights over Third World women or something?” While the film has uneven sound quality, and uses non-professional actors, it suited WMM’s longtime commitment to films about rape, and is clearly an educational narrative film that was intended to spark discussion in community-based and women’s organizations.<sup>108</sup> More specifically, it exemplified a kind of narrative in which women who respond to racist sexual violence collectively become empowered by taking action.<sup>109</sup>

A specialized brochure printed for PDV:L was mailed to numerous university and community group lists in 1986, and dozens of colleges, libraries, and women’s, health, and community organizations purchased or rented the titles in the collection. Customers included CUNY TV in New York, the School of the Art Institute Chicago, Oberlin College, the University of Ottawa, the American Museum of Natural History, the Massachusetts Department of Health, and San Francisco State University.<sup>110</sup> However, rolling out the PDV:L program involved more than simply making the films available for distribution, and part of the program funding was allocated for hosting community screenings and discussions.

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<sup>108</sup> In an essay about discussion films about race relations in U.S. schools after integration, Anna McCarthy suggests that these kinds of “stylistic deficiencies,” such as contrived acting and forced didactic scripts, “modeled a particular kind of civic personhood” and “revealed racial assumptions in the liberal imagination” in postwar discussion films about race. Further, though the “wooden” performances could be criticized as “bad acting,” in fact they “provided viewers with a tangible reminder of the valued sociological distinction between individuals and their social roles.” With this kind of reading, the didacticism and antinaturalistic performances in a film like *The Confrontation* becomes potentially more complex and poignant. See Anna McCarthy, “Screen Culture and Group Discussion in Postwar Race Relations,” in *Learning with the Lights Off*, edited by Devin Orgeron, Marsha Orgeron, and Dan Streible, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 398, 404.

<sup>109</sup> WMM’s commitment to films dealing with sexual assault was especially significant given the “blame the victim” politics ushered in during the Reagan presidency. See a discussion of this context alongside reviews of several 1980s rape films in Anne Sisson Runyan, *NWSA Journal* Vol. 3, No. 2 (Spring, 1991): 323-326.

<sup>110</sup> PDV Latina Reports, 1986-87, Women Make Movies Papers.

In a report to PDV:L funder the New York State Council for the Humanities, Matías described the outcomes of three community screenings.<sup>111</sup> One such site was Solidaridad Humana, a community educational organization specializing in adult literacy and job training for Hispanic residents on the Lower East Side. Nearly two hundred adult students of varying ages viewed the film *Carmen Carrascal* during two separate screenings. Sonia Rivera, the partner for that site, directed the discussion, which Matías described in her report:

The videotape raised many interesting questions in both sessions. Sonia centered the morning discussion on the effect of family, marriage, and education on Latinas....she directed the discussion so that the audience was able to see the connections between the choices they, as individuals, had to make in their lives and how women are expected to behave in Latin American society.<sup>112</sup>

Interestingly, Matías' account of the evening session, which was "too large for an intimate discussion," described precisely the kind of gender dynamics that several films in the collection highlighted and called into question: "This session was dominated by the men in the group; the women were intimidated by the men's monologues which went on for five to ten minutes. The men were analytical of the film's political, economic, and class content. They did not deal with the specificity of the film."<sup>113</sup> According to Matías, Rivera was able to steer the conversation back to the role of women in Latin American society, but the only solution the men offered to the problems of women in Latin America was "for family men to participate more in domestic work and the rearing of the children."<sup>114</sup>

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<sup>111</sup> Since film reception is a notoriously difficult area to account for in historical research, Matías' report provides a rare glimpse of this type of community screening event, which I outline here.

<sup>112</sup> Beni Matías, Letter to Jay Kaplan, 10 May 1986, Women Make Movies Papers.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid.

Other community screenings described in the report were held at the Center for Family Life in Brooklyn, a comprehensive advocacy and support services organization for low-income children, and at a Methodist Church in Washington Heights, organized with La Asociación de Mujeres Latinoamericanas. Some notable observations from the screening discussions covered in Matías' report include reference to (1) the isolation felt by many Latina women in urban settings as a result of their traditional role in the house, closely tied to the family, and (2) the similarities between women's problems in Latin American and in New York City—employment, housing, medical attention, child care, and education—and the crucial role that community groups have in working towards better solutions to women's struggles. Matías observed that the community screening in Washington Heights “was crucial to the development of an awareness that the women in Washington Heights were not alone.”<sup>115</sup>

In 1985, four PDV:L titles screened at special event at the American Museum of Natural History called “Latin and Black Perspective on Contemporary Living.” In partnership with the museum's Department of Education and the Public Education Department of the Postgraduate Center for Mental Health, WMM screened *El Hombre, Cuando Es Un Hombre, ¿Y Su Mama Que Hace?*, *Carmen Carrascal*, and *Mujeres Del Planta* alongside Mark Robson's 1949 film *Home of the Brave* about a black soldier's mental crises. Moderators and discussants for the three-day film program included film historian Donald Bogle, Dr. Jao Nuñez from the Postgraduate Center for Mental Health, and several other sociologists and psychoanalysts to “provide insights into the cross-cultural phenomena of sexism, racism, and poverty.”<sup>116</sup>

Additionally, WMM produced a ten page study guide to accompany the PDV:L collection; its objectives were “to establish a dialogue between men and women, Latin and North

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<sup>115</sup> Ibid.

<sup>116</sup> Poster for Latin and Black Perspective on Contemporary Living, ca. 1985, Women Make Movies Papers.

Americans about social, sexual, and political differences and similarities; to promote a better understanding of the Latina experience; to provide an alternative to the image of Latinas and Latin American society portrayed in other media.”<sup>117</sup> The Study Guide contained a number of useful components: (1) it categorized a number of films from the collection according to shared themes (such as “The Socialization of Women” and “Community Organizing”), (2) provided sets of discussion questions, (3) featured tips for organizing film screenings (setting, technical equipment, etc.), (4) printed critical essays on feminism and film in Latin America (by Benamou and Ana Maria Portugal), and (5) included additional related resources, organizations, and bibliographic information in the final pages (including books and articles by Julia Lesage, Pearl Bowser, and Marysa Navarro, and contact information for Third World Newsreel, Icarus Films, and the Central America Resource Center).

Interestingly, alongside the suggested discussion questions that accompanied each film listing in the Study Guide, brief descriptions of prior film screenings were printed as well, to illustrate, perhaps, the potential “pratfalls” or challenges of screening the film in question. For example, an accompanying blurb for the film *El Hombre, Cuando es Hombre* states:

One of these screenings was attended by working class Puerto Rican and Dominican mothers...their reaction [to the film] clearly indicated that they believed that the status quo of women in Latin America could not be changed....At another screening, where the audience was more middle-class and college educated, the focus was on changing the traditional male/female relationship. Here the discussion leader had to make sure that the men did not

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<sup>117</sup> Punto de Vista: Latina Study Guide, ca. 1986, Women Make Movies Papers.

dominate the conversation, particularly because the film concentrates on the volatile subject of machismo.<sup>118</sup>

In her introduction to the Study Guide, Matías outlines some of the audience responses from community screenings, and states that viewers “raised important connections between growing up female in Latin American society and being Latina or Hispanic in the United States.”<sup>119</sup> These insights, coupled with Benamou and Portugal’s concise overviews of the historical, social, and cultural contexts for viewing the films, established the Study Guide as a useful tool for educators or organizations wanting to facilitate screenings and conversations. While virtually all of the suggested discussion questions in the Guide were based on the films’ subject matter and the gender, economic, political, and social issues raised therein (rather than on the cinematic qualities of the films), they forge important contextual connections. For example, the questions draw attention to the relationship between working class women in the U.S. and in Latin America, between U.S. involvement in Nicaragua and Nicaraguan women’s personal lives, and between U.S. women’s consciousness-raising activities and those of Chilean women and native Quechua women in Peru, to name a few. As a whole, the Study Guide fused together many of WMM’s commitments—to women underrepresented in North American media, to education, to community-based screenings and programs, to partnerships with social movement activists and scholars, and to critical dialogue around the place of individual films and narratives in larger political histories and movements for change.

The PDV:L films and accompanying materials and events had immense ramifications for WMM as an institution. For one thing, the program helped give concrete form to WMM’s commitment to underrepresented women and women of color (both as filmmakers and on screen

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<sup>118</sup> Ibid.

<sup>119</sup> Beni Matías, Introduction, *Punto de Vista: Latina Study Guide*, ca. 1986, Women Make Movies Papers.

personages)—a commitment that WMM had articulated in the past, but had never staked out so explicitly as in the film catalogs and other distribution materials (partially because until this point distribution was such a scattered affair). Secondly, the collection also signaled an investment in films that experimented with and pushed the borders of cinematic forms and conventions, such as experimental approaches to documentary or dramatic films that blended poetry and art with narrative storytelling. This category of feminist film practice became enormously important in the 1980s as filmmakers responded to developments in feminist theory, and following PDV:L WMM took on several films that could be understood in the context of “feminist film theory films” (discussed below). Thirdly, perhaps most self-evidently, the PDV:L program enacted a certain kind of multi-level political engagement: national distribution on the one hand, and local community screenings on the other hand. Finally, through the publication of the PDV:L Study Guide and targeted outreach to the university market, WMM furthered its objective to be a leading resource for feminist media in the context of U.S. education. These four features are the hallmarks of WMM’s presence even now—explicit political engagement, aesthetic innovation, educational outreach, and the fostering of diversity (not, importantly, in the one-dimensional “multiculturalist” sense of “we are all equal,” but in the sense that there are economic and social realities that significantly condition women’s lives and experiences in specific historical contexts).

After careful observation and analysis of how WMM’s various programs functioned between July 1983 and September 1986, it was fairly obvious that distribution had become the organization’s “mainstay.”<sup>120</sup> As mentioned earlier, when Zimmerman became Executive Director in 1983, she tried to turn the distribution program around and was aided by a \$5,000

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<sup>120</sup> Report for Board Retreat, September 1986, Women Make Movies Papers.

grant from NYSCA. Grants from North Star and the Astrea Fund supported Zimmerman's salary and the research involved in developing the PDV:L program. After Zimmerman's first year as director, distribution continued to grow, workshop attendance dwindled, screenings had mixed success, and many former WMM members did not renew their membership. These tendencies necessitated a new staff person because of the increased distribution work, but they also raised questions about refining the organization's structure and functions. Should the membership program be maintained? If so, how? Could programs be developed without ties to specific grants? If distribution was to be a fundamental anchor, should other programs be cut?<sup>121</sup>

At WMM's re-organizing meetings in October 1975, there was consensus around concentrating efforts on an effective distribution program. As I have discussed, the realization of this commitment had been encumbered by several practical, institutional, and financial complexities over the span of roughly a decade. At a Board retreat in September 1986, board members and the small staff reasserted media distribution as WMM's major activity, priority "A."<sup>122</sup>

Following PDV:L, a new package of boundary-pushing experimental, narrative, and documentary films helped further link WMM's collection with the fields of Women's Studies, Film Studies, and Cultural Studies in a cluster called simply New Directions. A 1984 catalog presented this group of feature films, and contextualized them as part of a "second decade" of women's cinema:

The first decade of women's cinema centered on recovering their voices in straightforward documentations of their experiences. This collection represents the second decade—daring explorations challenging the filmic language and

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<sup>121</sup> Ibid.

<sup>122</sup> Notes from Board Retreat, September 22, 1986, Women Make Movies Papers.



traditional format which has allowed a distorted, iconic image of women to exist and flourish in traditional cinema.<sup>123</sup>

This also resonated, of course, with the shift in academic Film Studies from an “images of women” approach that dealt with stereotypes and “positive” vs. “negative” representations to a more complex approach that dealt with theoretical and stylistic issues. The New Directions collection included a number of important narrative and documentary films on a range of issues, and can be read from the vantage point of today as a retrospective package of canonical feminist films from the 1980s. Films by Michelle Citron, Sally Potter, Su Friedrich, Leslie Thornton, Trinh T. Minh-ha, and others filled the ten page catalog spread, which highlighted the formal innovations and deconstructionist approaches to filmmaking that flourished during this period—both responding to and shaping developments in feminist theory. The featured titles included *Far From Poland* (Jill Godmillow, 1984), which scholar Pat Aufderhede described as “film criticism and social criticism at the same time,” *What You Take For Granted...* (Michelle Citron, 1983), which scholar Linda Williams called “a uniquely engaging blend of fact and fiction,” and *Reassemblage* (Trinh T. Minh-ha, 1982), an experimental documentary about Senegalese women that became a canonical text of feminist media in the 1980s and a landmark film in a history of feminist film theory.

Following PDV:L and New Directions near the end of the decade was the creation of a third important package of films, called Changing the Subject. This program was a series of twelve film and video works by Black, Asian, and Latin women from Australia, Canada, Britain and the U.S., which was screened at Anthology Film Archives in New York City, and featured prominently in WMM’s distribution materials near the turn of the decade. Patricia White, well

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<sup>123</sup> Catalog proof, 1984, Women Make Movies Papers.

known today as a feminist film scholar and Chair of the Board of WMM, worked on staff at WMM for a period in the 1980s and curated the Changing the Subject program with Zimmerman (as well as a number of other film programs and events). Reviewing the program in *The Independent*, Helen Lee remarked that the screening “demonstrated how recent work by women of color can be instrumental in changing the aesthetic norms and social mandate of independent production as well as the usual distribution circuits and exhibition sites.”<sup>124</sup> Lee praised the collection further: “Call it a new aesthetics of whatever, but the stuff of Changing the Subject makes a strong argument for eradicating the age-old partitions of form and content of First World aesthetics versus Third World activism.”<sup>125</sup> Anthology, too, was an interesting venue for the initial screening. Lee notes, “Anthology—long the bastion of high modernism, is a bold, decidedly political move for WMM—and Anthology.”<sup>126</sup>

The Changing the Subject collection, like New Directions, included titles that are now viewed as canonical in WMM’s collection, such as Julie Dash’s *Illusions* (1982), Trinh T. Minh-ha’s *Surname Viet Given Name Nam* (1989), and Tracey Moffatt’s *Nice Colored Girls* (1987). It also included Pam Tom’s *Two Lies* (1989), Hiroko Yamazi’s *Juxta* (1989), and work by noted artists Mona Hatoum, Midi Onodera, and Zeinabu Davis. As a whole, these films offered beautiful cinematic innovation and formal experimentation, expanding a vision of “multicultural” media beyond popular presentations such as the PBS Series *Eyes on the Prize* (Henry Hampton/Blackside/PBS, 1987, 1990). The three 1980s special collections I have called out in particular—PDV:L, New Directions, and Changing the Subject—were immeasurably important for WMM as it reoriented itself toward distribution in the 1980s.

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<sup>124</sup> Helen Lee, “Subject to Change: Works by Women of Color Challenges the Status Quo,” *The Independent*, July 1990, 10.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid, 11.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid, 10.

There are a few matters that I would like to underscore as I conclude this chapter, which will also help set additional context for chapter five. The first involves a general dilemma faced by non-profit arts groups in the U.S. around the matter of finances. Since around the 1980s and the Reagan-era overhauling of public funding for the arts, there have been several substantial transformations in the funding landscape for non-profit arts organizations, including a continually rising expectation that these organizations should be self-sustaining. Margaret J. Wyszomirski outlines these transformations in her discussion of recent changes in the non-profit arts sector:

During the 1990s, nonprofit arts and cultural organizations experienced substantial changes in both the patterns of their revenues and the practices of many of their financial supporters. These changes made the task of fundraising more demanding for them and shifted the allocation of time and attention many nonprofit arts organizations expended on various public funding sources. Most notable was diminished attention to the federal arts agency, the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), both in filing fewer grant applications and in undertaking less intense advocacy efforts concerning the agency's annual budget allocation.<sup>127</sup>

Mounting pressures to increase earned income and acquiesce to market pressures, and unstable conditions around private philanthropy have exacerbated the challenges in the shifting landscape for non-profit organizations over the past few decades. While some larger institutions such as major urban museums could rely on some corporate support, work to expand their

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<sup>127</sup> Margaret J. Wyszomirski, "Arts and Culture," *State of Nonprofit America*, ed. Lester M. Salamon, (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2002), 189, <http://site.ebrary.com/lib/pitt/Doc?id=10063872&ppg=201>

entrepreneurial ventures (through restaurants and gift shops, and cultivating new donor groups) or bolster their endowments, small and mid-size arts organizations often had more limited options to hedge the shifting funding patterns.<sup>128</sup> In short, non-profit arts organizations, and smaller ones like WMM in particular, faced significant structural transformations in the 1980s and 1990s that challenged them financially, administratively, and politically.<sup>129</sup>

According to a 2002 study by Americans for the Arts, cited by Wyszomirski, non-profit arts organizations, on average, *received half of their revenue* from ticket sales or other earned income, 39 percent from individual donations, 2.5 and 3.5 percent, respectively, from corporate and foundation support, *and just 5.5 percent* from public sources.<sup>130</sup> Given these percentages, even if we take them roughly—50% earned income; 9% foundations and grants—it is unsurprising that a non-profit arts organization’s solvency will depend upon its ability to identify sure avenues for earned income.<sup>131</sup> While, starting in the 1980s, the circumstances for public grants became worse, as I have described, WMM’s situation for earned income from academic markets improved, with both Film Studies and Women’s Studies growing in the academy—a development to which WMM responded.

During the period that WMM reorganized its distribution program, many scholars, such as Jane Gaines and bell hooks, wrote about the ways race was historically elided in film and film

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<sup>128</sup> New York’s Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) Free Friday Nights Program, for example, has had corporate underwriting since 2004.

<sup>129</sup> Interestingly, even while Wyszomirski’s essay provides a useful broader financial context for non-profit arts organizations, it makes no mention of film culture specifically—opera, museums, theater, and even non-profit publishing are mentioned—which suggests that even in the present, film culture is often associated with for-profit, commercial institutions.

<sup>130</sup> Wyszomirski, 189, my emphases; see the Research section of the Americans for the Arts website for updated reports and statistics: “Research,” *Americans for the Arts*, [http://www.artsusa.org/information\\_services/research/reports/default.asp](http://www.artsusa.org/information_services/research/reports/default.asp).

<sup>131</sup> Updated figures from Americans for the Arts estimates that in the present, earned income accounts for 60% of non-profit art organization revenue, up from 50% a decade ago. See “Source of Revenue for Nonprofit Arts Organizations (Estimated),” *Americans for the Arts*, [http://www.artsusa.org/pdf/get\\_involved/advocacy/research/2013/rev\\_sources13.pdf](http://www.artsusa.org/pdf/get_involved/advocacy/research/2013/rev_sources13.pdf)

discourse, and WMM's film collection provided new and meaningful lenses for thinking about feminism, race, identity, and representation in the context of academic Film Studies. It was also a moment when multiculturalist discourses prevailed in numerous institutions—schools, museums, media arts centers, and many of these organizations sought out WMM films for their programming. I think it is also important to point out, however, that at this moment WMM continued to distribute social issue documentaries, which may not have been in as high demand in Film Studies as, say, Sally Potter's *Thriller*, but which *were* in demand in all kinds of other educational and institutional contexts outside the context of studying cinema.<sup>132</sup>

But the academic *film* context is nonetheless crucial here. In academia, a fresh sweep of approaches to thinking about feminism and film heralded a new class of influential academics, and new opportunities for teaching film and video. Books emphasizing psychoanalysis surged to the forefront, such as Kaja Silverman's *The Subject of Semiotics* (1983), Annette Kuhn's *Women's Pictures* (1983), Teresa de Lauretis' *Alice Doesn't* (1984) and E. Ann Kaplan's *Women and Film* (1984). While many scholars in various fields found these developments energizing, some were more skeptical, such as B. Ruby Rich, for example:

Seventies-style politics were finally receding and giving way to new concerns. By the mid-eighties, psychoanalytic feminism was consolidating its position as the only cinematic approach to carry weight in the academy. Its opaque language and narrow assumptions were becoming, astonishingly to me, the lingua franca of feminist film theory. I was feeling increasingly isolated and disheartened as many

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<sup>132</sup> This other group of WMM film users outside of Film Studies is defined as part of the "institutional market," and I discuss its significance at length in chapter five.

of my former cohorts fell by the wayside, switching careers or disciplines or else succumbing to the siren call of academic fashion.<sup>133</sup>

Rich's remarks indicate an important shift in the terrain of feminist Film Studies in the 1980s, one that reverberated throughout feminist scholarship for many years.<sup>134</sup> But it is also important to draw attention to the rise of Cultural Studies approaches to film and media in the 1980s, in which sex, gender, race, and sexuality were central terms. Whether one agrees with Rich or not, it is difficult to underestimate the ways that feminist film theory has shaped the academy. Further, it would be difficult to underestimate the ways that WMM and feminist media studies have shaped one another.

The relationship between academia and WMM that developed in the 1980s was not merely reciprocal (as in, each institution supports the other), nor was it only driven by economics (university library purchases film; film sustains WMM and helps support filmmaker). If we see feminist film theory (and its concomitant alignments with psychoanalysis, semiotics, and post-structuralism more broadly), as a force that nurtured the growth of Film Studies and Women's Studies as disciplines and stimulated the institutionalization of feminist work in all fields, then similarly, we can understand the expansion of feminist scholarship as stimulating the institutionalization of WMM's. The growth of Women's Studies Programs in the 1970s and 80s, and the role of feminist media studies as an important, nutritive force in Film Studies as a whole, helped establish longstanding and meaningful interest in WMM's mission in university

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<sup>133</sup> B. Ruby Rich, *Chick Flicks*, 287.

<sup>134</sup> See See Sandy Flitterman-Lewis, "Camera Obscura: Feminism, Culture, and Media Studies," *Camera Obscura* 61 (2006): 27-38; Annette Kuhn, "The State of Film and Media Feminism," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 30, no. 1 (2004): 1221-28; Laura Mulvey, "Looking at the Past from the Present: Rethinking Feminist Film Theory of the 1970s," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 30, no. 1 (2004): 1286-1292; Patrice Petro, "Reflections of Feminist Film Studies, Early and Late," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 30, no. 1 (2004): 1272-78.

structures. These tendencies provided eager marketplaces for both WMM's realist-style, social issue documentaries (of primary interest to Women's and Area Studies programs), and its formally innovative so-called "theory films," (of primary interest to Film Studies programs). In the next chapter, I continue to address WMM's expanding role in education, and the way that a changing, increasingly globalized world impacted WMM as it evolved its collection to speak to globalizing media, transnational film, and the shifting dynamics of independent film distribution and exhibition.

## 5.0 VITALITY AND VIABILITY

This final chapter offers a descriptive approach to understanding WMM's endurance in the realm of independent feminist media, and explores its functions in the present as a North American feminist distributor that is featured prominently on a global stage. I want to begin by reiterating that WMM has always had some dimension of an international presence and reach, even when it operated as a community media organization in the 1970s. In WMM's earliest years, it screened its workshop productions in various venues around the U.S., but also at international festivals in Toronto, Halifax, Berlin, and elsewhere. And while it distributed a number of its own films throughout the decade (by the workshop students, members, and co-founders), it also distributed in the U.S. titles from Australia (*The Moonage Dreams of Charlene Stardust* [Sydney Women's Film Co-op, 1974]), the U.K. (*The Amazing Equal Pay Show* [London Women's Film Group, 1974]), and Italy (*Trial for Rape* [Loredana Rotondo, et al, 1979]). Thus, despite WMM's early emphasis on a notion of "the local," its films and community have always exceeded the organization's *physical* location in New York City.

The special collections of films from the 1980s that I discuss in chapter four—Punto de Vista: Latina, New Directions, and Changing the Subject—expanded and diversified WMM's distribution collection with additional international perspectives and strengthened WMM's relationships with filmmakers outside the U.S. Further, these collections signaled a shift toward



WMM's continuous expansion of a distribution program that would become increasingly international in scope.

It may seem obvious to point out, but the large-scale changes in the 1990s and 2000s, including rapid globalization of commerce and global flows of people, information, and cultural objects; consolidation of corporate media; transnational processes of movement, interaction, and production; and rapid technological changes involving digital media and media convergence, digital filmmaking and film software, the Internet, Web 2.0 and nascent 3.0, social media, and mobile visual technologies, utterly transformed how we think about and relate to the world, and to one another, in the present. Globalization and its attendant transformations in global media and communication have also impacted, of course, how we think about media, information, and education.

By the mid-1990s, social theorist Martin Albrow had already declared we were living in “the global age,” and one way universities responded to and theorized these global transformations was to establish Global Studies programs and encourage an emphasis on “globalist” perspectives, which gained footing in numerous fields.<sup>1</sup> The rise of “the global” and “the transnational” as key intellectual and institutional paradigms in U.S. universities designated global and transnational film and media as especially constructive in classrooms. WMM has long had a keen interest in maintaining a distribution collection that offered diverse, multicultural visions of women's lives, and just as the growth of Film Studies and Women's Studies departments was important for WMM's evolution as an institution in the 1980s, universities' investments in “globalist” and transnational inquiry has been important to WMM's continued

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<sup>1</sup> See Martin Albrow, *The Global Age: State and Society Beyond Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996).

vitality as an independent distributor throughout the 1990s and 2000s. These are important considerations in this chapter.

But first, I step back a bit to contextualize further the ramifications of WMM's transitions in the 1980s, which are the purview of chapter four. The decision to operate primarily as a distribution organization, while affirmed several times at various meetings and retreats from the late 1970s through the mid-1980s, eventually became actualized after 1983 under the new leadership of Debra Zimmerman. For many logical and causal reasons, it is tempting, then, to characterize this period as a kind of watershed moment of reinvention, in which Zimmerman's directorship, a dedicated staff and Board, and several important film collections pulled WMM back from the brink of collapse and then pushed it forward in a promising new direction. From 1983 to 1984 alone, WMM's distribution income rose from \$8,089 to \$23,945, and these numbers continued to rise each year: in 1985 to \$47,887; in 1986 to \$79,183.<sup>2</sup> But in actuality, WMM did not completely redefine itself in the 1980s. More accurately, it redefined *the ways by which* it would go about fulfilling its founding mission to support women's filmmaking and professionalized its organizational structure, the politics around which I discussed in the previous chapter.

The significance of the institutional transitions at WMM in the mid-1980s surpasses the project of refocusing the main agenda of the organization towards distribution. It involves a shift in how WMM positioned itself in relation to feminism, which of course yields its own challenges, successes, and fluctuations over time. From its unofficial origins in 1969 to its incorporation in 1972, through its various configurations in the 1970s and early 1980s, WMM was legible as a certain kind of organization for alternative, community-based educational and

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<sup>2</sup> Distribution summary report, ca. 1987, Women Make Movies Papers.

feminist media. If we understand feminist cinema to involve not only a body of feminist films, but also film practices and the relations of production and reception, WMM's activities for more than a decade are demonstrably linked to this particular understanding of feminist media. WMM helped produce feminist films and supported women's filmmaking, for sure, but also boasted a collective, non-hierarchical organizational structure; membership-based decision-making; collaborative training through productions; consciousness-raising films and screenings; community screenings and outreach; alternative exhibition; and constant reflection and reevaluation—these were tenets that WMM embodied, or at least, worked diligently to embody for over a decade, in pursuit of a specific form of feminist political engagement.

Following WMM's structural alterations in the 1980s, its embodiment of feminist ideals shifted: in place of small, community-oriented media production workshops, it instituted a fiscal sponsorship program to support women filmmakers; and in place of local community-based screenings, it took part in screenings at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) and high-profile international film festivals to exhibit women's film. These shifts have the dualistic result of both raising the prestige and profile of feminist media by bringing it more firmly into establishment arts arenas, and, in so doing, contradicting some of the very anti-establishment political commitments that alternative feminist media culture articulated in the first place.<sup>3</sup> But these shifts also reflect larger tendencies around non-commercial filmmaking itself—with constant changes in technology and equipment, the decline of community arts organizations, new landscapes for non-profit arts funding, and increased production programs and film schools, independent production moved out of community groups and into professional schools and institutions. In other words, WMM's structural changes in the 1980s and 1990s were direct

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<sup>3</sup> This issue is addressed in several of the essays in the anthology *Alternative Art New York 1965—1985*, edited by Julie Ault, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002).

responses to the changing media arts community—its values, assumptions, priorities, and organizations.

I would like to suggest that while WMM may have let go of some of its 1970s founding ideals of community-based education in production and collective organization in favor of a professionalized model of non-profit arts administration, it has remained uncompromising in terms of its original feminist mission to support films *by and about women* and maintain a strong focus on education. This remains a unique achievement. Consider Iris Films and New Day Films, which may be viewed as analogous to WMM, as they were founded in the 1970s by feminist filmmakers, and still survive today—New Day is now a broader social justice media distributor and Iris a production company.

At crucial moments throughout its history, WMM has remained committed to keeping its doors open, helping women filmmakers get their films out into the world, and in many other ways sustaining cultures of feminist film—in short, WMM has remained viable and vital. Therefore, in the remainder of this exploratory, concluding chapter, I examine the more recent history of WMM within the framework of institutional viability.

Over the past twenty years or so, WMM has operated primarily two major programs, which I will outline in this chapter: (1) distribution and (2) production assistance, which itself has two main branches. The production assistance program at WMM today is an outgrowth of the “fiscal conduit program” that was initiated in the late 1970s and contains two components: a workshop series and fiscal sponsorship opportunities for filmmakers.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Fiscal sponsorship (or a fiscal conduit program) by an organization helps filmmakers to raise money for their films by allowing them to use the 501(c)(3) non-profit status of the organization—WMM’s program is elaborated further in this chapter.

The first major branch of the production assistance program is a series of workshops, which provides meaningful occasions for independent filmmakers to learn from and network with industry professionals. WMM offers these low-cost workshops (usually \$20-\$40 each) several times per year, which tend to cover the practical details of getting a film made and seen by audiences—not necessarily the technical aspects of filmmaking (filming, lighting, editing, etc., which are taught in film schools), but everything else involved in the business of producing a film—proposal writing, budgeting, fundraising, marketing, promotion, distribution options, film festivals, and the like. Zimmerman teaches some of these workshops, such as “Navigating the International Film Festival Circuit,” in WMM’s New York City office or online through a new Webinar (Web-based seminar) format, and many outside experts are often brought in as workshop leaders or moderators, depending on the content. In recent years, for example, “Meet the Funder,” “Meet the Festival Programmer,” and “Meet the Broadcaster” workshops brought to the WMM offices industry professionals from organizations like PBS’s POV, the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Sundance Film Festival, the Tribeca Film Institute, Impact Partners, the MeetMarket (a European pitching initiative), and Catapult Film Fund, which offers development funding for documentary filmmakers.

These workshops provide another example of how WMM has transformed itself over time to remain viable while upholding its commitment to support the needs of women filmmakers. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, attendance at production workshops fell drastically, while the one workshop offered on fundraising attracted ample attention—and today, these financing and film industry workshops that deal with the business of independent filmmaking remain attractive to women filmmakers seeking information, strategies, resources, and support to help execute their vision.

The second and more elaborate branch of the production assistance program involves fiscal sponsorship of independent women filmmakers. In 1979, when WMM was still involved in film production, member Janet Benn established guidelines for (1) approving “in house” production proposals and (2) supporting fiscally sponsored projects for non-WMM filmmakers, both of which required that all proposed projects must be by women filmmakers. For the first set of films—projects that would be produced or co-produced by WMM—the films had to also “deal primarily with women’s issues.”<sup>5</sup> Today, WMM’s fiscal sponsorship program continues to implement the second set of guidelines. In this case, the proposed film could be about almost any topic as long as no strong objections were raised by the membership. These propositions set a lasting precedent. To this day, WMM will consider for distribution only films that are *by and about* women; but through its fiscal sponsorship program, film projects can technically be about any subject matter, although many of them tend to address gender-related issues.

If a film proposal is accepted by WMM for fiscal sponsorship, the filmmaker then has the opportunity to fundraise through the 501(c)(3) non-profit status of WMM. While fiscal sponsorship can help support a range of services and projects in the arts, social justice organizations, and community organizing, in the realm of film it offers filmmakers a non-profit, tax-exempt umbrella, through which they can raise money for their projects—this is sometimes necessary because many foundations that support independent film will issue grants only to non-profits, not to individual filmmakers, hence WMM is the “conduit” for transmitting funds the filmmaker. In short, when filmmakers align themselves with an established non-profit to serve as a fiscal sponsor, the organization can receive donations on their behalf. Moreover, many foundations and individuals prefer to make contributions to projects with a non-profit status

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<sup>5</sup> Newsletter, July 1979, Women Make Movies Papers.

because they can receive a tax deduction for their donation. In addition to WMM, whose program is quite large by comparison, dozens of non-profit arts organizations in the U.S. offer opportunities to apply for fiscal sponsorship, including the Independent Filmmaker Project (IFP), International Documentary Association (IDA), and Community Partners.

When the sponsoring organization takes on a project, it becomes legally responsible for the funds received and must ensure that the filmmaker uses those funds for non-commercial purposes and in accordance with the agreed upon terms between the donor and the project, and that the donor's reporting requirements are met. In practical terms, this means an immense amount of staff time and labor for the sponsoring organization—database and financial management for each sponsored film project, acknowledgement of donor contributions for tax purposes, year-end reports, managing 1099 tax forms for project consultants, extensive IRS reporting, and auditing of project files by the organization's accountants.

In exchange for providing filmmakers with a crucial conduit for fundraising through all of the activities listed above, sponsoring organizations charge application fees and receive a percentage of the funds raised for each sponsored project—the industry standard is about 7-10%; IDA's percentage is 7%, IFP's is 6-10%, and WMM's is 6-8%.<sup>6</sup> Since providing fiscal sponsorship is such a labor-intensive endeavor for the sponsoring organization's staff, the fees associated with it often just barely cover the administrative costs (or overhead); in other words, fiscal sponsorship is never an income-generating program for the organization. WMM reviews fiscal sponsorship applications three times per year, has a full-time staff member that serves as production assistance program manager (though several other staff members and consultants assist with the fiscal sponsorship activities) and assesses a 6% fee for all grants, except for

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<sup>6</sup> Fiscal Sponsorship FAQ, <http://www.wmm.com/filmmakers/fsprogramfaq.shtml>

National Endowment for the Humanities and State Humanities Council grants, for which it charges 7% to cover the additional reporting required.

According to the fiscal sponsorship division of WMM's own website, since 2008 the program has helped complete more than 100 film projects and disperse more than \$10,000,000 to filmmakers.<sup>7</sup> It supported the development of important feminist films like Cheryl Dwyne's *The Watermelon Woman* (1996), Julie Dash's *Daughters of the Dust* (1991), and Kimberly Peirce's *Boys Don't Cry* (1999).<sup>8</sup> And although it is rare for films that are completed through the fiscal sponsorship program to then get picked up for distribution through WMM, it can happen if a film is seen as particularly well suited for the WMM distribution collection. In recent years, Yunah Hong's *Anna May Wong: In Her Own Words* (2011), Michelle Midori Fillion's *No Job For a Woman: The Women Who Fought to Report WWII* (2011), and Natalia Alamada's *El General* (2009) were completed through the support of the fiscal sponsorship program and are now distributed by WMM.

The benefits of fiscal sponsorship for filmmakers are clear: they gain a valuable tool that expands their fundraising options, have access to expert consultations in independent film financing, and can attract greater attention and resources by affiliating themselves with a well-known organization. The sponsoring organization can benefit, too, albeit not in financial or even quantifiable terms. While WMM does not receive financial incentive for fiscally sponsoring films (as mentioned earlier, the administrative fees barely cover the program's actual cost), the success of films emerging from the program can be beneficial for fortifying WMM's professional image and brand as a source for high-quality independent film. Many titles that

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<sup>7</sup> Support Our Sponsored Projects. [http://www.wmm.com/filmmakers/sponsored\\_projects.aspx](http://www.wmm.com/filmmakers/sponsored_projects.aspx)

<sup>8</sup> Peirce's film, which WMM assisted at the script development stage, is probably one of the few titles from Production Assistance program history that went on to relatively large-scale commercial, theatrical success.



reach completion through the production assistance program go on to win awards and screen at prestigious film festivals, and major award nominations, wins, and festival screenings are announced on the WMM website, in its e-newsletters to filmmakers and distribution customers, and via social media outlets Facebook and Twitter. These kinds of announcements reinforce the status of the WMM image by highlighting the recognition of its films by Academy Award, Emmy Award, and Peabody Award nominations and wins, as well as by acceptance to and award wins at important and influential film festivals like Sundance.

There are numerous examples of these kinds of award nominations and wins from the production assistance program (and the Distribution collection, which I will address later). *Sun Come Up* (Jennifer Redfearn, 2010), a film about the effects of climate change in the Carteret Islands, was nominated for a Best Documentary Short Academy Award. *El General* (2009), mentioned above, was finished through the production assistance program and garnered Sundance's Best Director in U.S. Documentary Award for Natalia Almada; the film is now also distributed through WMM. A documentary about child migrants and immigration by Rebecca Cammisa, which was also completed through WMM's production assistance program—*Which Way Home* (2009)—won more than a dozen awards, including an Emmy Award and a Robert F. Kennedy Journalism Award, and was nominated for an Academy Award, Independent Spirit Award, and multiple Emmy Awards (it won one for Outstanding Informational Programming).<sup>9</sup> Consider also Shola Lynch's documentary about Angela Davis, *Free Angela and All Political Prisoners* (2012), which was produced through WMM's production assistance program, screened in the Gala section of the Toronto International Film Festival in September 2012, and

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<sup>9</sup> "Awards," *Which Way Is Home* website, <http://whichwayhome.net/awards.html>.

was described in the *New York Times* as a “pointed act of retelling.”<sup>10</sup> The press and festival coverage around this documentary brought attention to Lynch, of course, and also to her first documentary feature about the first black U.S. Congress woman Shirley Chisolm and her presidential campaign—called *Chisolm ‘72: Unbought and Unbossed* (2002)—which is distributed by WMM.<sup>11</sup>

In 2012, two filmmakers affiliated with the WMM production assistance program were awarded the highly prestigious MacArthur Foundation “Genius Awards,” unrestricted grants offered through the Foundation’s Fellowship Program. Filmmaker Natalia Almada produced three films through WMM’s production assistance program: *El Valador* (2012), *El General* (2009), and *All Water Has a Perfect Memory* (2001); the latter two are also distributed by WMM. The second and only other filmmaker to win a MacArthur award in 2012 was Laura Poitras, another highly acclaimed documentary filmmaker who is working on the third film in a trilogy about American life and political policy post-9/11. The first two films in the trilogy were produced through WMM’s production assistance program: *The Oath* (2010), which won Sundance and Gotham awards, and *My Country, My Country* (2006), which was nominated for an Academy Award, Independent Spirit Award, and Emmy Award. Although the films mentioned above are documentary features, narrative films are occasionally selected for WMM fiscal sponsorship. The most notable example from recent years is Dee Rees’ film *Pariah* (2011), a feature-length, coming-of-age and coming out drama about an African American teen

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<sup>10</sup> Nicholas Rapold, “A Radical Beatified,” *New York Times*, April 4, 2013, <http://movies.nytimes.com/movie/470828/Free-Angela-and-All-Political-Prisoners/overview>

<sup>11</sup> In the spring of 2013, Lynch appeared on the Melissa Harris Perry Show on MSNBC, and the *Free Angela* documentary received extensive press coverage in *The Village Voice*, *Huffington Post*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Washington Post*, and other venues, garnered celebrity support from executive producers Jada Pinkett-Smith, Will Smith, and Jay-Z, and is slated for a limited theatrical release in AMC theatres in New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, Philadelphia, Oakland, San Francisco, Boston, Washington DC, Atlanta and Detroit.

exploring her sexuality. *Pariah* won an Excellence in Cinematography Award at Sundance, and was picked up for distribution immediately by Focus Features.

The production assistance division of WMM today can be seen as a way to carry on the organization's foundational commitment to provide support for women filmmakers. If "providing access" for women filmmakers in the 1970s meant teaching technological skills and supplying equipment, what it might mean in the present is providing "access" to resources and support around the business of filmmaking: to fiscal sponsorship for filmmakers so they can attain valuable foundation support, to information on financial planning and resources, and to the expertise of WMM's staff. Production assistance is also a complement to WMM's Distribution service, since it fosters the development of new work and emerging filmmakers like Dee Rees, whose success with her first film *Pariah* will likely propel her toward numerous other opportunities. For some filmmakers, success with their WMM-supported films means they are able to go on to larger-scale projects in the independent arena, or (more rarely) to commercial productions in film and television. Kimberly Pierce's *Boys Don't Cry* (1999), mentioned above, received much critical acclaim, and she was able to go on to direct the Iraq War drama *Stop Loss* (2008), produced by MTV Films and featuring Hollywood stars Joseph Gordon-Levitt, Channing Tatum, and Ryan Phillippe.

Lisa F. Jackson, on the other hand, whose tremendously successful documentary about rape in the Congo called *The Greatest Silence* (2007) is distributed by WMM, directs and produces documentaries mainly for television networks, including the HBO documentary *Sex Crimes Unit* (2011), and dozens of films and programs for PBS, HBO, ABC, The Learning Channel, and other networks. Consider also Meri Weingarten, who made a widely screened documentary in the 1980s about sexual assault called *Waking Up to Rape* (1985), a film whose high sales and

rentals were crucial to WMM's revitalization in the 1980s. Weingarten has since had an extensive career as an editor, producer, and director in television for CBS, ABC, and HBO, as well as for PBS documentaries. She also worked on feature films including the Academy Award winning *Harlan County, U.S.A.* (1976), *Arthur* (1981), and *Visions of Light* (1992), and directs a film program at the University of Southern California's School of Cinematic Arts. Moreover, renowned figures like Sally Potter, Valie Export, and Jane Campion are examples of filmmakers who distributed their earlier experimental films with WMM and then transitioned to produce for the European art house market.

If the production assistance program is how WMM is best known to filmmakers and some professionals in the independent film industry, then the distribution program is how it is best known to university librarians, academic professionals and educators, and film programmers at various festivals and institutions. While the complex origins of distribution at WMM are explored in earlier chapters, I want to emphasize that the current film distribution paradigm emerged from a very particular set of political, economic, and structural circumstances in the mid-1980s (the specifics of which I delineate in the previous chapter). However, the widespread funding struggle for independent arts organizations in the 1980s was not limited to WMM, of course, nor was it limited to arts organizations in the United States.

As Julia Knight and Peter Thomas write about the British context, for example, some film and video organizations in the U.K., such as London Filmmakers Co-op and London Video Access, were subsidized by the government because of their "perceived cultural importance," but still expected to generate earned income through distribution.<sup>12</sup> When the available funding is reduced suddenly, the long-term survival of these organizations can be "seriously threatened," as

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<sup>12</sup> Julia Knight and Peter Thomas, *Reaching Audiences: Distribution and Promotion of Alternative Moving Image* (Bristol: Intellect, 2011), 187.

Knight and Thomas explain, “unless they can adapt to the changed environment.”<sup>13</sup> Due to various structural changes involving the government councils that provided grants, public funding aid for film organizations was cut drastically. Since London’s two women’s film and video distributors—Cinema of Women (COW) and Circles—relied greatly on government support and generated less than fifty percent of their revenue through earned income (primarily distribution), these funding cuts were debilitating and after a failed merger of the two, both organizations closed down in 1991.<sup>14</sup>

Circles managed to reopen under the name Cinenova in October 1991 with one year of support from the British Film Institute (BFI). During this period in the 1990s Cinenova had not only inherited the feminist mission of its predecessors, but it was also the sole remaining U.K. distributor of media directed by women, and thus felt a strong sense of responsibility to make available “a wide range of historical and contemporary moving image work by women.”<sup>15</sup> While a diverse catalogue of films was available, many of the titles were rarely rented or purchased; ongoing deficit problems continued and Cinenova closed down by the year 2000.<sup>16</sup> In short, in the U.K., the women’s film and video distributors Cinema of Women and Cinenova shut down because of difficulties with commercial viability: “One of the key reasons Cinenova was unable to effect the transition from grant-aid dependency to self-sustainability is that women’s film/video distribution in the U.K....had not developed on a commercially viable

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, 189.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, 204.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, this is partially due to the relative lack of university/educational support for independent media in Europe compared to the U.S.

basis.”<sup>17</sup> Since there had long been strong national support for the arts in Britain and much of Western Europe, defunding was perceived as particularly shocking.

At WMM in New York, however, a similar moment of crisis in the 1980s led to processes of revitalization and professionalization around distribution specifically. The 1982 moment of crisis at WMM—the brink of collapse—is described in WMM’s own historical materials as a “low point” but also as a “turning point.”<sup>18</sup> In practice, this moment was marked by a renewed commitment to film distribution for its reliable income-generating possibilities. But we could also say that the various transitions in WMM’s priorities and internal organization from the 1980s through the present are marked by a larger, more abstract notion of viability and relative independence from government funding entities. Zimmerman has stated:

We’ve been defunded by the government twice as a feminist organization. Back in the 80s, the new (Presidential) administration decided that women had accomplished enough and our category of funding from the National Endowment to the Arts was shut down [referring to Expansion Arts]. And then, during the cultural wars of the 90s, we were branded a lesbian pornographer by a (particular) Congressman. As a result, we lost our funding from the NEA, but in neither case did it kill the organization because we can operate on the money we earn. We are very appreciative of the grants that we get, and we do have individual donors as well. But, generally the grants that we get help us to do special projects and help us to move the organization forward.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid, 192.

<sup>18</sup> Board information packet, ca. 1986, Women Make Movies Papers.

<sup>19</sup> Interview with Debra Zimmerman, Action Now Network,  
<http://actionnownetwork.com/home/contents/?tag=debra-zimmerman>.

The censorship battles that Zimmerman alludes to here involved a flurry of news stories and Congressional controversies in the 1990s, most notably around a film from WMM's production assistance program, *The Watermelon Woman* (1996), a film about a black lesbian made by a black lesbian, Cheryl Dunye, and one from its distribution catalog, *Hide and Seek* (1996), an award-winning film about lesbian adolescence in the 1960's by Su Friedrich.<sup>20</sup> Representative Peter Hoekstra (R-MN) from the Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations started investigating NEA grant recipients, wrote to the NEA Chair Jane Alexander, and accused the NEA of funding child and lesbian pornography.<sup>21</sup>

One issue this story illustrates is that WMM was ahead of its time, so to speak, in distributing lesbian feminist material that was "controversial" enough to spark debates about public arts funding in Congress. This was a moment when queer theory was just beginning to become institutionalized in universities, the 1990s "wave" of LGBT films (such as *Go Fish* [Rose Troche, 1994] and *High Art* [Lisa Cholodenko, 1998]) was still confined to independent film festivals and the art house circuit, and "mainstreamed" representations of gays and lesbians (in shows like *Will and Grace* [NBC, 1998—2006] and *The L Word* [Showtime, 2004—2009]) had not yet achieved primetime exposure on television.

The second realization about WMM's distribution that the 1990s NEA funding controversy made visible is that WMM could remain financially viable without NEA support. University professors, community group leaders, health educators, film programmers, and many others had a strong interest in screening, teaching, and writing about the films in WMM's

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<sup>20</sup> Also under attack were lesbian shorts by Baby Maniac, *Sex Fish/Sex Bowl* (1994), which was distributed by WMM at the time and is now distributed by Video Data Bank, and *Blood Sister*, which the WMM catalog described as a film that "centers on a diverse cross section of the lesbian S&M community which embrace political activism and community service as well as the commitment to sexual pleasure heightened by pain."

<sup>21</sup> Other NEA recipients also came under attack, such as Canyon Cinema, for publishing pictures of elderly lesbians kissing in their film catalog. For a time, Canyon lost nearly all of its NEA funding.

collection, whether the NEA liked it or not, and the purchases and rentals made by these groups and individuals sustained WMM as an organization.

If independent feminist distribution is the means, then viability is the ultimate end, which opens up all kinds of compelling questions about the politics of WMM's distribution program in particular. Up to this point in my project, I have focused mainly on the struggles and structures involved with film distribution, and WMM's internal ideological debates around professionalizing distribution. But post-1983, WMM has no longer wavered around how to apply its foundational mission to sustain feminist film culture, and has both whittled down and expanded, in some senses, the purview of its activities—production assistance, distribution, and a less distinct third area of community engagement, which I will address briefly later. Since distribution is the program among the three that not only generates income but also enables WMM's financial solvency, it seems to warrant some questions about the business of selling feminist media. What happens once a viable distribution model becomes the central goal? What does it look like? What kinds of films are distributed? How are they circulated? And for whom?

By way of an exploratory conclusion, the remainder of this chapter begins to address these questions. I seek to map out how WMM's distribution collection functions in the present, and reflect on how the catalog and its organization resonates with discourses around transnational feminist film and the politics of independent film distribution in a globalized visual cultural space.



## 5.1 THE INSTITUTIONAL MARKET

From the late 1980s through the present, WMM continued to orient itself toward the institutional market in general and the U.S. university system in particular. Several concrete activities enabled this shift: (1) forging relationships with scholars through ventures like the Punto de Vista: Latina and Changing the Subject collaborations and organizing a major 1986 conference on women, culture, and media at Hunter College called *Viewpoints*, which brought together six hundred activists, critics, filmmakers, and scholars, (2) streamlining the larger film collection into several discrete categories, such as “Women and Health” or “Violence Against Women,” which could be marketed to social workers, health organizations, community groups, medical schools, and the like, and (3) analyzing data around film requests and purchases. For example, for fiscal year 1986-87, the collection of “Cinema Studies” films, which included Sally Potter’s *Thriller* (1979) and *The Gold Diggers* (1983), Michelle Citron’s *Daughter Rite* (1979) and *What You Take for Granted...* (1983), Su Friedrich’s *The Ties That Bind* (1984), and Trinh T. Minh-ha’s *Reassemblage* (1982), accounted for five of the top ten films by gross, and 30% of the total distribution income in that period (this collection could also be read as WMM’s “art film” division).<sup>22</sup>

Zimmerman, White, and many other staff members initiated vigorous acquisition and promotional activities to shape a collection of feminist media in the 1980s. WMM also began comprehensive analysis of these distribution activities to better understand which subject areas (health, lesbian, etc.) and formats (mainly 16mm and video) were most desired, and which customer groups purchased from the different film subject areas. Unsurprisingly, “Cinema

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<sup>22</sup> Collection Totals 86-87, Women Make Movies Papers.

Studies” customers were 72% schools and 20% festivals, with only 3% community groups, 2% libraries, 2% television, and 1% institutions; customers of lesbian films, however, were only 37% schools, 27% community groups, 18% institutions, 13% festivals, 5% libraries, and 0% television.<sup>23</sup> These percentages reflected tendencies to use the formally experimental feminist art films mostly in Film Studies and the lesbian documentaries mostly in community groups.

Between fiscal year 1984-85 and 1989-90, distribution income rose from \$29,232 to \$286,377.<sup>24</sup> WMM continued to receive some grant income from NYSCA, but this income as a percentage of WMM’s gross income shrunk from 42% in 1984 to just 10% in 1990. Between fiscal year 1986-87 and 1989-90, NYSCA income increased by 11%, but at the same time, WMM’s distribution income increased by 68%.<sup>25</sup> Over the decade between 1978 and 1988, WMM expanded its catalog from twelve titles in circulation to more than one hundred titles in circulation, and this allowed distribution income to expand greatly in turn. By 1988, the catalog had roughly 140 titles, including lucrative documentaries like *Far From Poland* (1984), *Why Women Stay* (1980), *Being a Prisoner* (1975), *But Then She’s Betty Carter* (1980), *Healthcaring* (1976), and *Labor More Than Once* (1983), and experimental films like *Double Strength* (1978), *Luna Tune* (1979), *Gently Down the Stream* (1981), and *She/Va* (1973).

This period in the 1980s was a prolific and energizing moment for feminist production and feminist media studies (which I describe briefly in chapter four), and WMM provided a space for filmmakers to get out their work. In a complementary way, WMM films provided a lot of material for scholars to consider issues around lesbian desire, aesthetic experimentation, and race, identity, and subjectivity. However, there were other developments in scholarship and

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<sup>23</sup> Distribution analysis, ca. 1987, Women Make Movies Papers.

<sup>24</sup> Distribution income by quarters, ca. 1990, Women Make Movies Papers.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

education at this time that were important for WMM's successful expansion—namely, the increased use of video for educational purposes. I want to address this category of consumption for a moment—educational video—because although WMM still distributed works on film, it also embraced video in the 1980s (and eventually DVDs from the late 1990s through the present). WMM's soaring business in the 1980s paralleled its expanding collection, which included more work on video and more documentaries as a form.

While using moving image media in U.S. classrooms and other institutional settings was certainly not a new development in the 1980s (far from it; see my first chapter for a discussion of the 1960s-70s context), video's low cost, portability, and relative ease of use compared to 16mm film made it extremely popular as a "teaching aid" in a broad range of educational settings.<sup>26</sup> Video recording formats were fairly widely available for consumer use in the 1970s, such as the Sony U-matic, but Betamax and VHS formats in the 1980s really exploded the video market and were even more accessible and affordable for filmmakers and viewers. These formats became enormously popular educational tools in higher education and many K-12 schools. For one thing, unlike 16mm which required that a projector be set up separately from a screen (and often in a separate booth), screening a video for a class could now be done all on one mobile cart (VCR below, television above), and did not require a trained projectionist. Teachers in the same building could more easily share and move the equipment on a media cart and just "pop in the tape" for use in their own classrooms. Second, the VCR's ease of operation allowed teachers to easily pause, rewind, and replay parts of a video for discussion or to highlight certain moments for further study. Moreover, video became a core component of the Department of Education's

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<sup>26</sup> See the excellent anthology on the history of film's early educational uses in the U.S., *Learning with the Lights Off: Educational Film in the United States*, eds. Devin Orgeron, Marsha Orgeron and Dan Streible (New York: Oxford UP, 2012).

educational reform in the early 1990s, and was regarded as a technology that could involve students in “complex, authentic tasks,” “motivate” reluctant learners, and help teachers to be more “effective and creative” in designing lessons.<sup>27</sup>

In short, moving images were used in a variety of classroom settings prior to the advent of video, but the massive rise of video use in the 1980s further solidified the institutional position of educational media, especially documentaries. Because making use of the latest video technology was seen as an important aspect of being on the cutting edge of educational practices, institutions continued to maintain budgets for media acquisitions, which in turn allowed distributors like WMM to rent and sell VHS tapes at institutional pricing just as it did with 16mm prints. Even by 1985, only a few years after WMM had rejuvenated its distribution program, most of its titles were available on both 16mm and video formats. Take WMM’s film *Waking Up to Rape*, which was one of its top-performing documentaries in the 1980s: to rent it on film cost \$60 and purchase on film cost \$500; to rent on video cost \$50 and to purchase on ¾” tape cost \$350, and on VHS \$250.<sup>28</sup> Although WMM sold a number of titles on video in the 1980s, 16mm prints were still preferable for rental among many organizations.

While there was a general drive among educational institutions to acquire educational documentary videos on the one hand, WMM became more deeply involved with educational marketing on the other hand. For example, in 1986 WMM received a grant to research and develop an “arts in education” program, and to help it expand into the high school market. Using this grant, WMM created screening and discussion programs for high school dropout students, which brought in four filmmakers to show their work and talk about filmmaking with the

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<sup>27</sup> See Nancy Schmitz, “Using Video to Productively Engage Learners,” in *Technology and Diversity in Higher Education*, ed. Yukiko Inoue (Hershey: Information Science Publishing, 2007), 235.

<sup>28</sup> WMM Catalog, 1987, Women Make Movies Papers.

students—Jackie Shearer, Chris Choy, Peggy Stern, and Sharon Sopher were the participating filmmakers.<sup>29</sup>

In sum, while indeed feminist media scholars in the university system may have been clamoring over some WMM filmmakers like Sally Potter, Lizzie Borden, Barbara Hammer, Julie Dash, and others in the 1980s, there were also scores of other institutional users seeking out WMM's films.<sup>30</sup> This group of users is hugely important in the trajectory of WMM's development. They included many scholars and university instructors in fields outside of Film Studies, for sure, but also high school teachers, health educators, community group leaders, government agencies, museums, women's centers, labor organizations, public libraries, correctional facilities, professional organizations, local television stations, and media arts centers. These are the kinds of groups that define the "institutional market," and it would be hard to overstate their significance in sustaining WMM, from this transitional point in the 1980s that I have focused on through the present moment.

WMM remains a self-sustaining organization that returns royalties to filmmakers by renting and selling its films to the institutional market. The precedents established in acquiring and marketing the collection in the 1980s, then, are absolutely crucial for understanding WMM's distribution program in the present. On the one hand is the feminist film and media studies market, which at the time was focused mainly on formalist innovations/experimental video, and on the other hand is a much wider institutional market that includes academic fields outside of film (History, Anthropology, Sociology and Social Work, Women's Studies, Latin American Studies, Asian Studies, Political Science, etc.) and all the organizations mentioned above. These

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<sup>29</sup> Program Overview, ca. 1987, Women Make Movies.

<sup>30</sup> I should add, however, that film professors were not the only ones seeking out the "new wave" of feminist media: arts institutions like the Women's Studio Workshop, the Whitney Museum of American Art, and MoMA used WMM films to enrich their programming with 1980s women's experimental video.

groups were not necessarily looking for formalist films by artists like Leslie Thornton, however, although Thornton's *Adynata* (1981) was a popular title for university customers. Instead, they were looking for primarily documentary films that would complement their teaching, or educate their constituencies about women's lives and women's perspectives on the U.S. prison system, health care, rape, war, abuse, and many other subjects.

Even a cursory look at distribution reports from 1986 reveals the following purchases of WMM films, and I imagine their uses: *But Then, She's Better Carter* (Michelle Parkerson, 1980), purchased by the Michigan Women's Music Festival, which could use the film to complement its programming with a feminist history of a famous jazz vocalist, *Why Women Stay* (Jacqueline McSweeney and Debra Zimmerman, 1980), purchased by Montefiore Hospital, which could use the film to hold discussions with its employees and health workers about the complexities of domestic abuse and "battered women's syndrome," *Labor More than Once* (Liz Mersky, 1983), purchased by the National Lawyers Guild, which could use the film to discuss the legal issues faced by lesbian parents, and *Greetings from Washington D.C.* (Rob Epstein, Greta Schiller, Frances Reid, and Lucy Winer, 1981) purchased by the Gay and Lesbian Alliance, which could screen the film to learn about the first gay and lesbian rights march on Washington.<sup>31</sup>

It is rather impossible to encapsulate the hundreds of preview, rental, and sale transactions that WMM processed as it expanded its collection in the 1980s, but to give a better sense of the sheer range of institutions requesting film previews or purchasing titles, here are some further examples of WMM film users between 1986 and 1988: women's and community groups like Boston Women's Health Collective, Women's Transit Authority, Church World Service, Women's Therapy Center, Lesbians Choosing Children, and Family Crisis Center;

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<sup>31</sup> Distribution Reports, January—June 1986, Women Make Movies Papers.

schools like University of Alabama, Dartmouth College, Community College of the Finger Lakes; prisons like Taycheedah Correctional Institution for Women and New Bedford Women's Center; art institutions like the Whitney Museum of American Art, Cleveland Museum of Art, Women's Studio Workshop, Otis Art Institute, and Museum of Modern Art; television outlets like WYNC public television and CUNY television; film festivals like Vancouver Film Festival and Scottsdale Film Festival; and a host of other major institutions like the American Hospital Association, Society for Cinema Studies Conference, Institute for Policy Studies, Gay and Lesbian Alliance, and Harvard Film Archive.<sup>32</sup>

WMM's financial structure in the present is based on distribution to the institutional market, and specifically the educational market—primarily sales or rentals of DVDs, and increasingly digital licenses, to colleges and universities, and many organizations like the ones mentioned above. In fact, if you Google search the phrase “film and educational marketing,” a site from within WMM's is fourth on the results list.<sup>33</sup> One reason WMM has been so successful as a distributor in North America is precisely that this institutional market, is somewhat unique to English-speaking countries. In Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and to a lesser extent, the U.K, institutional markets exist, but they are not as extensive as in the U.S.<sup>34</sup> It might sound a bit trite, but WMM's distribution model really is a “triple win” situation (and Zimmerman states this frequently in interviews): (1) institutions get the kinds of films they need for their programming, and educational and cultural work, (2) the filmmakers get royalties so they can go on to pursue other projects (and for some independent documentary filmmakers, getting a film picked up by a distributor is an important accomplishment), and (3) WMM earns income to continue

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<sup>32</sup> Distribution Reports, 1986—1988, Women Make Movies Papers

<sup>33</sup> Results from search on 6 May 2013.

<sup>34</sup> Interview with Debra Zimmerman, Wellington Access Radio Podcast, February 10, 2012, <http://wellywoodwoman.blogspot.com/2012/02/global-treasures-debra-zimmerman-women.html>.

operations.<sup>35</sup> One clear way to stay viable, then, is to know your markets, and for WMM, this has meant a steady shift toward social issue documentaries, which give insight into women's stories and issues that are simply not represented in most corporate media, and which can be used for educational purposes in a variety of settings.<sup>36</sup> In this way, its mission in the present is actually not so different than its founding mission—to help reshape the landscape of moving image culture, and at the same time create “structures of opportunity” for women, to borrow Kathleen McHugh's phrase, within that landscape.<sup>37</sup>

WMM receives about 85% of its total income from the earned income from distribution, and of that, roughly 70% of the distribution income comes from the U.S. educational market specifically—the remainder is accounted for by other institutional customers and broadcast sales, for example.<sup>38</sup> Distribution thus enables WMM to earn most of its income by circulating feminist films for educational use. Moreover, there are two additional advantages to this particular kind of distribution that may be less obvious, but are important for thinking about how WMM's films are actually used by institutional customers. First, many of the purchasers and users of WMM films screen them for organizational and group-oriented use, which enables a model of film screening and discussion that can be productive, and in fact harkens back to WMM's early days as a community-based organization. Clearly, a great number of the films in the catalogue are documentaries about social and political issues, and many films intend to be

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<sup>35</sup> See for example, Interview with Debra Zimmerman, Center for Social Media, <http://www.centerforsocialmedia.org/making-your-media-matter/showcase/debra-zimmerman-and-women-make-movies>

<sup>36</sup> I should point out that some WMM new releases seem increasingly to have found a home on public and premium television networks, such as *Orchids: My Intersex Adventure* (Phoebe Hart, 2010), which was broadcast on Showtime, and *Service: When Women Come Marching Home* (Marcia Rock and Patricia Lee Stotter, 2012), on PBS, and *Atomic Mom* (M.T. Silvia, 2011) on Documentary Channel.

<sup>37</sup> See Kathleen McHugh, “The World and the Soup: Historicizing Media Feminisms in Transnational Contexts,” *Camera Obscura* 72, 24.3 (2009): 111-150.

<sup>38</sup> Interview with Debra Zimmerman, Wellington Access Radio Podcast, February 10, 2012, <http://wellywoodwoman.blogspot.com/2012/02/global-treasures-debra-zimmerman-women.html>.



catalysts for conversation and activism around a particular cause or struggle for justice—for example, the struggles of Mexican American migrant workers in U.S. education programs in *Escuela* (Hannah Weyer, 2002), or rape survivors speaking out about sexual violence in the Congo in *Fighting the Silence* (Femke and Isle van Velzen, 2007). What is usually referred to in Film Studies as “alternative exhibition” scenarios—organizational, educational, or community group settings, as opposed to individual in-home use from the consumer market or a commercial theatrical release, facilitate this model of documentary engagement.

The second reason WMM remains committed to institutional marketing (again, beyond economics) is that the dominance of colleges and universities as WMM customers means that much of the audience for its films is comprised of students. Zimmerman has stated that WMM “feels really good about that,” because many young people are watching the films at a time in their lives when they are particularly open to new perspectives, and as she states, “a lot of our films are about social justice, and about change.”<sup>39</sup>

In addition to institutional marketing, a second way to pursue viability is to acknowledge some of the realities of distribution, and work with those realities rather than against them. For WMM one of these important realities is that 10% or 20% of the films in the collection reliably make nearly 80% of the money each year: what I will refer to as the 20/80 phenomenon. This point bears repeating: 20% of the films earn 80% of the income. While they vary year to year, 20% films tend to share some similar qualities: they tend to be realist-style, highly polished, social issue documentaries that screen at, and often win awards from, the major international festivals for documentary: Sundance, Toronto, IDFA, and HotDocs. A few examples from recent years include *No Job For a Woman: The Women Who Fought to Report WWII* (Michelle

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

Midori Fillion, 2011), *Price of Sex* (Mimi Chakarova, 2011), and *Pink Saris* (Kim Longnitto, 2010). What marks an 80% film is much harder to specify since it encompasses so much of the collection, but these films tend to be more experimental and perhaps more exploratory in form and structure. Whether or not a film falls into the 20% in a given year is by no means an indicator of the film's quality; rather, it is reflective of the specific needs of the educational market, which can fluctuate according to news headlines and seeks out films that have a wide scope and resonate with "hot button" global issues important to educational customers. In the present, this is generally a demand for documentary films that shed new light on some aspect of American history, or foreground such subjects as globalization and labor issues, war, ethnic violence, Islam, and struggles around democracy, which parallels the growth of University institutes and centers that focus on these issues (such as Peace and Conflict Studies, Social Movement Studies, and Global or International Studies).

According to Zimmerman, the 20/80 phenomenon is more or less a fact of film distribution in general, and not specific to WMM. But this dynamic creates both constraints and possibilities in building and maintaining the collection, which WMM deals with in interesting ways. In the broadest sense, the constraints involve taking on a certain number of high profile films that will have a clear demand in the educational market and become income-generating powerhouses, which in turn allows somewhat more fluid possibilities for the remainder of acquisitions. An important component of the possibilities enabled by the 20/80 phenomenon is a certain notion of preservation—maintaining a feminist film archive of "80%" films that are rented and sold infrequently, earn the filmmaker and WMM little income, but are nonetheless significant films to uphold as such in WMM's distribution collection. Thus, in order to continue making available canonical feminist classics (such as Sally Potter's *Thriller*, Laura Mulvey and

Peter Wollen's *Riddles of the Sphinx*, Michelle Citron's *Daughter Rite*) and aesthetically significant films (such as Tracey Moffatt's *Nice Colored Girls*, Laleen Jayamanne's *A Song of Ceylon*, and a compilation of films by Maya Deren)—categories for which WMM was perhaps best known in Film and Media Studies at one time, but for which there is relatively little ongoing demand in the wider educational market since most programs already own these titles—WMM needs to be cognizant each year of acquiring titles that will comprise the substantial income-generating 20%.

What this “given” of distribution means in practice is that the 20/80 phenomenon must be kept in mind when making decisions about which films will be acquired each year: it does not necessarily direct the acquisitions process, but it is an important aspect of the ongoing conversations around each year's new releases and the decision making process. The acquisitions committee, which includes Executive Director Debra Zimmerman, Director of Acquisitions and Public Exhibition Kristen Fitzpatrick (who started as an intern at WMM and has worked there for more than a decade), and many of the thirteen WMM staff members, views between three and five hundred films per year. Many filmmakers submit their films to the WMM office, and Zimmerman and Fitzpatrick also attend film festivals around the world scouting out potential acquisitions. Of these, WMM now acquires between twenty and thirty films each year (for a time the number was closer to forty releases each year), around 40% of which (and sometimes more than half) are made by women filmmakers outside of North America. This translates to roughly a 7.5% acceptance rate for the distribution program.

The criteria for selection are deceptively simple, but suit a commitment to both educational audiences and independent filmmakers: (1) the overall quality of the film, (2) the need for the film—perhaps a subject not yet adequately addressed (or addressed at all), and the

potential to develop a market for it, and (3) how distribution might impact the filmmaker's career. Importantly, the uniqueness of the institutional market creates a scenario such that acquisitions and marketing mutually shape one another—this is not completely tied to the 20/80 phenomenon, but is related to it. In other words, since films are selected throughout the year, those that are picked up for distribution earlier in the cycle will impact WMM's marketing plan for the upcoming year, which in turn might focus the remaining acquisitions more strongly on a particular subject area or region of the world, to then forge a more strategic marketing plan. For example, if WMM has already picked up a few films from Latin America about Latin American women's issues, it is easier from a marketing standpoint to then pick up a few additional films in that broad subject area, than other films that each deal with a separate issue. This relationship between acquisitions and institutional marketing has to do largely with the practicalities of running a non-profit organization, a relatively small staff, limited resources, and of course WMM's desire to distribute quality films that will be interesting and useful for its institutional customers.

WMM's staff does its own outreach and promotes the collection from major press releases around festival screenings, postcard and catalog mailings, down to many of the DVD cover designs. Since institutional marketing requires such labor intensive work in strategizing and creating promotional materials, building relationships with organizations, and researching professional organizations and other target groups, the acquisitions committee is especially careful about taking on only as many new films as the staff can reasonably handle in a given year. It would be nearly impossible for the staff to market forty separate titles on a completely individual basis and do it well. So instead, WMM now takes on fewer films each year, and does so with particular subject area or regional clusters in mind. Certainly not all of the new releases

are organized entirely around this dynamic, but again, if some of them are, it helps to facilitate more effective marketing for the year. In short, educational film marketing is labor-intensive and expensive, so as a non-profit organization, WMM needs to be very deliberate and strategic in executing its marketing programs each year.

For example, in 2008/2009, WMM picked up several films that addressed a range of issues facing women in different parts of Africa: *The Greatest Silence: Rape in the Congo* (Lisa Jackson, 2007, mentioned above), *Rough Aunties* (Kim Longinotto, 2008), about a group of women protecting abused children in South Africa, *Iron Ladies of Liberia* (Siatta Johnson and Daniel Junge, 2007), about Liberia's transition to democracy under the first female head of state and her women appointees, *Courting Justice* (Jane Thandi Lipman, 2008), about female justices fighting for judicial reform in South Africa, and *Nollywood Lady* (Dorothy Wenner, 2008) about Anyiam-Fibresima, a Nollywood producer, filmmaker, and the founder of the African Academy of Motion Pictures. While these films have vastly different subject matter, they could potentially be marketed as a cluster to African Studies Programs in universities and organizations for offering contemporary narratives of women in various parts of the African continent in terms of cultural traditions, activism, political life, justice system, and cultural production.

Beyond its reciprocal relationship with the marketing plans for a given year, grouping the films in various ways (as does a commercial operation like Netflix) serves a very practical function: it helps to organize such a massive and wide-ranging collection of films. There are two primary ways that films in the collection are grouped together. First, there is a searchable online index of 105 subject areas, which range from "abortion rights" to "young women" with scores of issues ("education"), themes ("activism"), world regions ("Middle East"), and even academic disciplines in between ("Cinema Studies"). Almost all films are cross-listed among several

subject areas. Part of the logic of sorting the films into subject areas, even if a film is indexed by ten different subjects, is to help institutional customers navigate the huge online catalog of more than five hundred titles. Maintaining a collection that sizable means that printing paper catalogs that list all the available films is no longer feasible. Of course, all the titles in circulation are online, and shorter printed catalogs (around eighteen pages) are produced annually to highlight the year's new releases, and the releases from the previous year or two are presented with briefer listings in the end pages.

The second way films are organized is through twenty-eight Special Collections, which bring together a range of films that offer many perspectives around a larger theme. The films in the Special Collection "Health and Politics," for example, address such wide-ranging issues as anorexia, abortion, childbirth, international surrogacy, toxic exposure, and inadequate care for women veterans. The Special Collections seem to be targeted largely at academic institutions (which makes sense, given that this is a major market), since the labels correspond pretty directly to recognizable department or program names: "Asian and Asian American Studies," "Literature: Women of Words," and "Transcending Gender." Clearly, these "packages" of films around subject areas or special collections have practical effects for institutional customers. They are useful for a media librarian at a large public university, for example, who processes acquisitions requests from numerous academic programs across the institution, by making the collection more easily navigable; they help a high school guidance counselor locate the films that address young women and girls specifically; and they might help a small community health organization more easily find the films that would be useful for its health education programs.

Moreover, the packaging of these films can serve as a marketing strategy in and of itself, related to the realities of the 20/80 phenomenon. Within a Special Collection, one or more of the

titles may be 20% films, popular titles that attract a lot of attention and sales, but chances are that most of the collection is composed of the other 80% films. When a 20% film is aligned with a number of other related titles, it helps maximize the exposure of the 80% films that may be harder to market individually. With the exception of new releases from the current year, purchasing a cluster of films from one of the “Special Collections” earns the buyer a discount, which thus encourages the customer to purchase of a mix of 20% and 80% films. This kind of bundling is an effective way to draw attention to films that might be more difficult to market. Kim Longinotto’s documentaries, for example, are some of the well-known 20% films, which consistently win awards at major film festivals, tell compelling stories about women activists from around the world, and are hugely popular with Western audiences. So, if customers seek out the film *Pink Saris* (Longinotto, 2010), about the head of a “Gulabi Gang” in Northern India that helps battered, impoverished “Untouchable” women navigate the justice system, they will see that the film is included in four Special Collections, one of which is “Women of South Asia Speak Out.” Clicking through the link on the website will lead them to more than a dozen titles which speak to a wide range of issues: forced marriages and rape in Cambodia, outsourced telephone service centers in India, women in the Black Tigers guerilla group in Sri Lanka, and a profile of the trade union Self-Employed Women’s Association (SEWA) in India, for example.

This kind of packaging of films is logical from a business and marketing perspective. But “packaging” here may also be read as representation—how the representations of women in the films, many of which are made in so-called developing countries, are then represented once again through WMM’s promotional materials through still images, descriptive text, and categorization for consumption by North American customers and audiences. An in depth-

discussion of this dynamic is beyond the scope of this conclusion, but I want to at least gesture to some of the pertinent details.

## 5.2 WMM IN A TRANSNATIONAL CONTEXT

On the one hand, WMM is a New York-based organization that gathers images of women from around the world and distributes them to North American audiences. In this way, WMM can be understood as a kind of feminist media “filter” in the U.S., and the politics of WMM’s location and its mechanisms of circulation opens up possibilities for a certain kind of critique informed by postcolonial criticism and transnational feminist debates. In other words, its institutional “packaging” of particular images, narratives, subjects, and identities can be read by some as problematic. On the other hand, there are numerous reasons to laud WMM’s endurance in the realm of independent distribution and its ongoing role as a persistent, international, advocate for feminist filmmakers. It is difficult to imagine what Film Studies in the U.S. would look like had films by Julie Dash, Lourdes Portillo, Barbara Hammer, Tracey Moffatt, Su Friedrich, Sally Potter, and many others not been made available to scholars, university librarians, and film programmers over the past few decades. Further, WMM’s huge success in the educational market, only some of which is owed to Film and Media Studies specifically, provides encouraging evidence that feminist media is used in a number of scholarly disciplines, and WMM’s success in the wider institutional market testifies to the important applications feminist media has outside the university system. Finally, given the relative scarcity of women filmmakers in competition at major international film festivals (Toronto, Sundance, Berlin, Cannes), and *even* at the major documentary festivals (Toronto, Sundance, Hot Docs, IDFA), it



is somewhat reassuring to know that WMM is frequently *there*—through their films but also often in person—to call attention to feminist concerns both in films themselves and in the industry and actively advocate for women filmmakers. Still, even if as scholars we are thankful WMM exists as a persistent fixture of feminist media advocacy, it does not mean we cannot think critically about the ways in which it frames films in specific ways.

It seems important to remark that WMM's circulation of "global cinema" is more complicated than an initial glance at its distribution program, with its attendant marketing challenges, reveals. As Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan articulated in an essay from 1996, which happened to discuss a WMM film:

The center-periphery model, or West/non-West binary, is inadequate to understand contemporary world conditions under globalization: the relations among gendering practices, class formations, sexual identities, racialized subjects, transnational affiliations, and diasporic nationalisms. Constructing monolithic notions of Western and non-Western subjects in binary opposition cannot always account for the complex, hybrid, and often contradictory subject positions that mark the era of postmodernity.<sup>40</sup>

Similarly, I would submit that, as an institution with considerable international reach, WMM cannot be understood in a binaristic fashion—as a Western organization that distributes images of non-Western subjects to North American audiences. Rather, WMM operates as a complex nexus, through which certain feminist images are projected to North American viewers and students, and a certain image of North American film feminism is projected to various

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<sup>40</sup> Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan, "Warrior Marks: Global Womanism's Neo-Colonial Discourse in a Multicultural Context," in *Multiculturalism, Postcoloniality and Transnational Media*, Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, eds, (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2003): 256.

international film audiences. The space in between the two “readings” of WMM’s film collection mentioned above—one critical of its function as a global “filter,” one celebratory of its existence and advocacy work—is rich with possibility for thinking about the structural politics of transnational feminist film and the circulation of women’s images in a globalized visual landscape.

What WMM’s distribution program activates are opportunities for (1) audiences in North American classrooms and organizations to learn about issues related to globalization, labor, health, war, and scores of other subjects of global relevance through the stories and perspectives of women, and (2) international women filmmakers to get their films seen, both through and beyond the audiences of film festival screenings. I will begin to address the ideological weight conferred by the former, but the details of the latter point are significant, too. WMM focuses solely on *North American* distribution: so, for example, if there is a film professor in India, or an anthropology professor in the U.K. who wants to access a WMM film for use in her classrooms, in fact her institution cannot purchase the title directly from WMM (it would have to find out who has the local rights to that film). Significantly, many of the films that WMM distributes do not have worldwide sales agents, and therefore do not have local distributors in countries outside the U.S. Sometimes, WMM is able to help in these circumstances to organize special television sales, or work with institutions to arrange screenings for group audiences.<sup>41</sup> But what this also means is that the North American distribution that WMM provides *may* be the only opportunity for a non-U.S. film’s exposure. This, too, has consequences for thinking about the movement of feminist media images in a global space. From one perspective, the film has a much larger

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<sup>41</sup> In these cases, teachers and scholars outside the U.S. are encouraged to contact WMM directly to figure out how to access the film. The reality is that most filmmakers want to get their work out, so arrangements between filmmakers and individuals can be made.

potential audience through WMM's distribution service and the filmmaker gains a certain status through her affiliation with WMM; from another perspective, this dynamic tends to reinforce a certain kind of North American dominance in terms of what (and who) defines a "global feminist media." However, as documentary scholar Heather McIntosh points out:

With the hybrid distribution deals of today, some makers go for a combination of PBS exhibition on television and online, Women Make Movies educational distribution, and self consumer distribution...For some makers, these outlets [like WMM, Cinema Guild, and New Day] provide a way to get their messages out without having to concede their visions or messages.<sup>42</sup>

Since WMM has developed this reputation around the world as an eminent resource for "global women's cinema," it works frequently with international film festivals in presenting programs to help promote women filmmakers and their work, and in that way reaches wider audiences than its North American educational customers. This labor is not exactly part of the distribution program, nor the production assistance program, but is meaningful feminist work nonetheless, and mirrors a longstanding WMM belief that film festivals are an integral platform for disseminating and advancing feminist media. Part of the objective for getting into film festivals is to generate "buzz" around a film, gain press, blog, and Twitter coverage for the film, and generally help to shape the film as a career-building object for the filmmaker. For some filmmakers, this festival circuit is the most important part of distribution. WMM takes on several of these international festival projects each year, assisting with program content and providing WMM films for public exhibition; some of them involve ongoing programming partnerships (such as with the Seoul Women's Film Festival or Women Make Waves in Taiwan).

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<sup>42</sup> Heather McIntosh, "The Fate of Documentary?" PBS POV Blog, August 23, 2011, [http://www.pbs.org/pov/blog/2011/08/the\\_fate\\_of\\_documentary/#.Ucyf-T7zbkl](http://www.pbs.org/pov/blog/2011/08/the_fate_of_documentary/#.Ucyf-T7zbkl)

In 2012—2013, WMM celebrated its fortieth anniversary with special film exhibitions in forty venues around the world, including festivals and showcases in the U.K., Germany, Spain, Sweden, the Czech Republic, Poland, Iceland, Turkey, Sierra Leone, Argentina, Monaco, Bolivia, Copenhagen, Newfoundland, and several U.S. locations.

With the women's film festival circuit continuing to expand each year, the volume of requests that WMM receives for programming consultation expands as well. Some international women's film festivals, such as the one in Creteil, France, have been around for many years (Creteil was founded in 1979), but it is an arena that keeps growing: Femcine in Chile began in 2011; Herat International Women's Film Festival in Afghanistan began in spring 2013; and a Ljubijana Women's Film Festival is planned for 2013. Significantly, these *women's* film festivals are not as populated by industry professionals as the "major festivals" (Toronto, Sundance, IDFA, HotDocs) and are therefore less helpful for women filmmakers looking for distribution or development funding. Thus, while they provide some public exposure for the film, they tend to be more geared towards building audiences, providing space for women to be among women talking about women's issues, and, in the process, strengthening an international community of independent women's cinema.<sup>43</sup>

I would like to return to the second point above, regarding the possibilities that WMM's distribution program activates. Alongside the influence and prestige associated with WMM's international presence, especially at festivals, its operations in the context of the North American institutional market merit critical consideration as well. Precisely because WMM focuses on this educational/institutional market in particular, a typical paradigm of reception for a WMM film

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<sup>43</sup> The difference between Women's International Film Festivals and other festivals is discussed in an interview with Debra Zimmerman, Wellington Access Radio Podcast, February 10, 2012, <http://wellywoodwoman.blogspot.com/2012/02/global-treasures-debra-zimmerman-women.html>.

involves students in U.S. university courses studying documentary films as one component of a larger pedagogical project. The potential for the colonialist baggage of documentary and ethnographic film traditions—racialized and gendered othering—to accompany the teaching of “multicultural media” in U.S. classrooms should not be overlooked, though reception and film pedagogy are little-documented and notoriously difficult areas to research. Nonetheless, it seems useful to gesture to the politics of looking that some WMM films, particularly those that resonate with discourses of “global cinema,” may enable.<sup>44</sup> Here, I concentrate on the “hazards” of the educational exhibition of global and transnational films in particular, because it seems to me the most pertinent for thinking about feminist media, looking relations, and education in the present.<sup>45</sup>

One possibility that screening multicultural, global women’s films in U.S. classrooms can open up is useful conversations with students and other audiences about the politics of location—namely, about subjects in Western institutions looking at representations of women in other parts of the world. In other words, it is possible for instructors to teach the fundamentals of postcolonial feminist critique by asking students to assess how a particular WMM film engages with problematizing essentialist constructions of “women” and notions of a “global sisterhood.” They can also help students see—very concretely—the ways that visual media can enable or challenge forms of neo-colonialism (through binaries of tradition and progress, for example, or sensationalizing the “barbarism” of non-Western cultures).

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<sup>44</sup> It is nearly impossible to capture the breadth of WMM’s present collection, but it covers feminist topics and narratives from all around the world, including many from the U.S. and its borders.

<sup>45</sup> However, it is likely there are some WMM films and programs from the past that might have been critiqued as essentialist, or as promoting a naïve “positive image” approach to women’s representation, for example, but here I aim to address just a part—although it is a significant part—of the contemporary collection of “global cinema.”

Although questioning representational practices is an essential component of Film Studies pedagogy, it is not *necessarily* an inherent part of the lesson plan when teaching a documentary film in a history course, for example, or an interdisciplinary seminar on international human rights (not to mention the other ways films might be used in organizational settings). It is not hard to imagine that some educators might employ documentaries about international women's issues (or any other subjects) for their deceptively simple claim to truthful reality. To what extent do educators and film programmers place credence in the "illusion," to borrow Patricia Aufderheide's phrase, of documentary's "transparent revelation of truth"?<sup>46</sup> Certainly, this is a risk of teaching and using documentary films about any number of subjects in any number of settings, but that does not mean that we cannot question its specific pertinence for thinking about the politics of WMM's distribution collection and how it is used. Screening WMM's media in U.S. classrooms and institutional contexts conjures up a host of possible pitfalls: objectification, exoticization, lack of historical context, and reinforcement of imperialist arrogance are risks that come to mind. Although, with my own relatively limited knowledge of the films themselves, I do not think that many of them align with these criticisms, there are some examples worth pointing to, and again, it is important to note that the use, overall context, and framing of a particular screening can either contribute to or push against the extension of an imperialist gaze.

The film *Warrior Marks* (Pratibha Parmar, 1993), produced by the famous author Alice Walker, is likely the central film from WMM's history that has garnered the most heated criticism with regard to imperialist and racist forms of representational practices. I point to it here not for thorough examination (this has been done extensively elsewhere), but as an example

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<sup>46</sup> Patricia Aufderheide, *Documentary Film: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford, 2007): 132.

of the *kind* of film that can become especially problematic, from a neo-colonial standpoint, if not taught or presented with adequate critical apparatuses. Even to summarize the film is to enter the controversies surrounding it, since its focus is on the practice in some African countries of “female genital mutilation” (FGM)—one whose naming is itself highly politicized (“female circumcision,” “female genital surgeries,” or “female genital operations” are considered by some to be preferable, more “neutral” terms). WMM’s collection includes several titles that deal with the practice, and the catalog descriptions consistently use the term “FGM.”<sup>47</sup> Patricia White offers a critical reading of several WMM documentaries that deal with female genital surgeries, including *Warrior Marks*, framing the films in discourses of neo-colonial feminism and documentary theory.<sup>48</sup>

Although *Warrior Marks* tries to present several positions on the issue of cutting, does not outright judge the African women interviewed in the film, and never depicts the surgery itself, it was made clearly as a political tool for a larger global movement to abolish FGM, which many Western feminists believe is a human rights violation. Based on her experience and treatment after a childhood accident that caused injury to her eye, Walker aligns herself with the alleged suffering of African women who have undergone FGM under the emotional connection enabled by “patriarchal wounds.” Her presence in the film is unrelenting, and privileged (along with selected “experts”) over the speech of “ordinary” African women who have undergone FGM or choose to have their children have operations.

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<sup>47</sup> Other WMM “FGM” films include *Africa Rising: The Grassroots Movement to End Female Genital Mutilation* (Paula Heredia, 2009), *Mrs. Goundo’s Daughter* (Barbara Attie and Janet Goldwater, 2009), and *The Day I Will Never Forget* (Kim Longinotto, 2002).

<sup>48</sup> Patricia White, “Documentary Practice and Transnational Feminist Theory: The Visibility of FGC,” *Blackwell Companion to Documentary*, Eds. Alex Juhasz and Alisa Lebow (Malden, MA: Blackwell, forthcoming, 2014).

Several scholars castigated *Warrior Marks* for imposing an “imperial fiction,” which “tries to institute a totalizing context for analysis of female circumcision” and forms a critique of the practice “around absolutist terms, including oppression, repression, and inhumanity.”<sup>49</sup> What seemed to be especially appalling to some critics of the film was that its director and producer were an African American and a woman of color, demonstrating that they were not exempt from the “legacy of self-righteousness,” as reviewer Cylena Simonds put it, that Western feminists held over non-Western feminists.<sup>50</sup> In their in-depth critique of the film, Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan argued that the film “assumes that a Euro-American multicultural agenda travels freely across national boundaries” and “reinscribes” the opposition between tradition and modernity “that is so central to colonial discourse and Western, metropolitan subject formation.”<sup>51</sup>

At the same time, there were some viewers who regarded the film as a positive, complex example of feminist documentary filmmaking. Women’s Studies Professor Linda Lopez McAlister, for example, praised the film, commenting:

I thought her [Walker’s] way of interviewing the women connected with the practice of genital mutilation (both proponents of and participants in the tradition and as grass-roots activists working to bring it to an end) was extraordinarily loving, respectful, and without arrogance. Though this film is a call for political action to support the curtailment of this practice as a human rights violation (a

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<sup>49</sup> Jude G. Akudinobi, “Libidinal Quicksand: Imperial Fictions, African Femininity, and Representation,” in *Female Circumcision and the Politics of Knowledge: African Women in Imperialist Discourses*, ed. Obioma Nnaemeka (Westport: Praeger, 2005), 156.

<sup>50</sup> Cylena Simonds, “Missing the Mark,” *Afterimage* 1.21 (1994): 3.

<sup>51</sup> Grewal and Kaplan, 257 and 268.



kind of terrorism against female children), the individual women who participate in it are not condemned.<sup>52</sup>

WMM was well aware of the heavy criticism leveled at *Warrior Marks*, but it stood by its decision to distribute the film and continues to do so, largely because of the sheer number of women and girls around the world affected by the issues addressed in the film. *Warrior Marks* continues to do well in sales even though it is twenty years old, and in fact, many institutional customers recently upgraded their VHS tapes to DVD, indicating that the film is still in use in classrooms. WMM's statement that it supports "many kinds of feminism" connotes a progressive and inclusive approach to a hugely dispersed and multidimensional political movement, but the case of *Warrior Marks* demonstrates that embracing many feminisms is clearly not an inoculation from feminist criticism.<sup>53</sup> Thus, perhaps, what ties together WMM's collection is less a distinct feminist politics, than a statement that committing to films "by and about" women is in itself an important feminist act, even if some will find the representational practices of certain films troubling.

Theorist Chandra T. Mohanty, a key figure in postcolonial feminist criticism, famously reproached Western feminists for constructing women as a homogenous group, and cross-cultural work that "seeks to uncover a universality in women's subordinate position in society."<sup>54</sup> One famous line from her seminal essay "Under Western Eyes" is the important observation that "Beyond sisterhood there are still racism, colonialism, and imperialism," and she urged scholars

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<sup>52</sup> "Warrior Marks: a Film Review by Linda Lopez McAlister," *The Women's Show*, WMNF-88.5 (Tampa, FL: WMNF, October 15, 1994), <http://mith.umd.edu/WomensStudies/FilmReviews/W/warrior-marks-mcalister>

<sup>53</sup> Zimmerman and others often say this in interviews and public talks; see for example Interview with Debra Zimmerman, Center for Social Media, <http://www.centerforsocialmedia.org/making-your-media-matter/showcase/debra-zimmerman-and-women-make-movies>

<sup>54</sup> Chandra Talpade Mohanty, *Feminism Without Borders* (Durham: Duke UP, 2003), 37.

to think through intersectionality even more deeply and complexly than before.<sup>55</sup> A question we might ask about WMM, then, is: Do its films perpetuate a Western imperialist gaze? Through which films and to what extent? And how is this related to remaining viable as an institution? For example, two subjects that stand out in WMM's collection are female genital operations (or "FGM"), mentioned above, and the issue of Muslim women and the veil; there are multiple films in the collection about each of these subjects from the past decade or so. That WMM continues to pick up films in these areas suggests that these works are demanded by the U.S. educational market, but to what degree does WMM's focus on these issues perpetuate stereotypes that some North Americans hold about, for example, African women and Muslim women? In other words, even while the films themselves may present diverse perspectives on their subject matter, and do not necessarily deploy a problematic neo-colonial gaze, the very fact that these subjects are a focus at all could be read as a way of compartmentalizing the concerns of non-Western feminists.

Although the films in WMM's collection come from many parts of the world, we can ask how they represent a plurality of global feminisms, and in what ways they represent what North American feminists *think* global feminism looks like. I wonder how a deeper investigation of WMM's international screening programs (at festivals and other events) and its U.S. distribution collection might reveal the difficulties and possibilities of globalizing a multicultural, transnational feminist agenda. To address these questions requires a truly in-depth exploration of WMM's distribution collection and its festival presence, which is well beyond the scope of this conclusion, but I wanted to raise them as potential ways to think more critically about the institutional structures that both allow and disable the circulation of feminist media, and the

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid, 36.

mechanisms of power that confer status and significance on certain filmmakers, festivals, and particular kinds of women's issues.

What strikes me as I think about WMM's profile in the present is the extent to which the marketing materials and packaging of particular films actually belie the richness of the films themselves. Perhaps grouping together production stills that depict diverse women on the same postcard or catalog cover gives an unintended impression of a facile global sisterhood—a heterogeneous group of “women” across the globe united in feminist struggle against patriarchy and oppression. In her seminal critique of Western feminist discourse, Mohanty writes, “What is problematical about this kind of use of ‘women’ as a group, as a stable category of analysis, is that it assumes an ahistorical, universal unity between women based on a generalized notion of their subordination.”<sup>56</sup> While WMM staff has said that they choose their lead images very carefully, a quick scan of catalog covers from the past decade, or promotional materials from recent years, reveals a kind of “mosaic” approach to visualizing multicultural feminism that may strike a chord as a kind of professional “brand” of multiculturalism for the U.S. educational marketplace. While in fact, many of the films articulate a statement that there are economic and social realities that condition women's struggles and experiences in specific historical contexts, and films by and about women can help us understand these specificities.

In addition, I am not sure there is a way around this representational marketing conundrum when using a single still image stands in for complex moving picture ones. The range of subjects in the film collection is so vast that it is impossible to encapsulate with a handful of production stills. In other words, perhaps what this somewhat troubling “packaging” issue reveals are the challenges of independent and educational film marketing in particular—

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<sup>56</sup> Mohanty, 31.

relying on still images for promotional postcard mailings, printed catalogs, and a text-heavy website catalog, rather than punchy trailers and high end advertising campaigns utilized by mainstream commercial media, or even other sectors of independent film that operate from within (and thus have the marketing resources of dominant studio structures).

What is also remarkable about many WMM films, is that they tend to show women empowered in their struggle against particular conditions of oppression, which are deeply contextualized in historical and cultural terms. This does not necessarily re-inscribe Western feminist concerns about oppressed “Third World” women, but in fact complicates how viewers think about these problematic binaries—Western/non-Western, agency/oppression, and so on. In an interview about the Special Collection on “Women and Global Labor,” for example, Zimmerman has said:

At this point in our history we at WMM feel a responsibility to do two things. One is to educate people in the USA about women’s lives in the so-called developing world because they are so often misrepresented by mainstream media. The other thing is for all of us to be able to learn from the work that women are doing outside of the USA. Many of the films present us with models that we could incorporate here in the USA in poor and working class communities.<sup>57</sup>

The tremendously complex inquiry into feminism and global looking relations that I have outlined here certainly merits further investigation, the depth of such an inquiry cannot be addressed adequately here. In sum, I think while WMM’s packaging of global women’s cinema may be open to critique, it is in pursuit of managing a hugely varied set of complicated films, and intricate institutional practices that negotiate the business of feminist media in meaningful ways.

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<sup>57</sup> Debra Zimmerman, Interview by Debra J. Liebovitz, “Women’s Labor in the Global Economy,” *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 5.2 (July 2003): 283.

Thus, we might ask: To what extent might some WMM films cast a notion of “global feminism” that is expressible and translatable through U.S. hegemonic understandings of agency and solidarity? Or, in what specific instances does WMM reproduce “ethnocentric universalism,” to borrow Mohanty’s term?<sup>58</sup> To address these questions requires a wider and deeper engagement with the films themselves, the circumstances around their production, and their uses in various educational and institutional settings.

By way of conclusion, it is also necessary to acknowledge a final and important way in which WMM operates in the arena of transnational feminist media in the present. If North American distribution of transnational media is one way WMM functions in a global space, and its production assistance program creates opportunities for women filmmakers, then there is a third branch of WMM’s activities which is harder to characterize. Even the website’s “General Information” section identifies two branches only: “Women Make Movies facilitates the development of feminist media through an internationally recognized Distribution Service and a Production Assistance program.”<sup>59</sup> While these two programs do not account fully for the extent of WMM’s reach in independent film culture, in the present they are the central ways by which WMM defines itself.

I would argue that in addition to these two programs for which WMM is best known, there is a third, more nebulous, but no less meaningful field of activities through which WMM sustains feminist film culture, and I want to give some attention to it briefly here. The activities in this “third realm” are too extensive and dispersed to encapsulate with a single term—but the connotations of community building, advocacy, and engagement begin to express, I think, how WMM continually expands its own institutional influence and an international sphere of feminist

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<sup>58</sup> Mohanty, 21.

<sup>59</sup> “About Women Make Movies,” [http://www.wmm.com/about/general\\_info.shtml](http://www.wmm.com/about/general_info.shtml)

film. We might call this arena WMM's advocacy role, or its community engagement, but the reality is that the functions of WMM as an institution far exceed its two main "official" programs.

This community building happens first through many long-term partnerships that WMM has forged with major cultural institutions and festivals, such as MoMA in New York City. MoMA has featured several WMM events over the years including a six-week retrospective in honor of WMM's twenty-fifth anniversary in 1997, and more recently a Lourdes Portillo retrospective for WMM's fortieth anniversary in 2012. Internationally, WMM has an ongoing partnership with Women Make Waves in Taiwan, an annual festival that is actually named after WMM and features programs of women's films from around the world; WMM often helps organize and provide films for the programming. Second, WMM's community building and advocacy happens through mentorship programs for individual filmmakers—such as a pilot program "Side by Side," with the Sarasota Film Festival, or internationally at the Ex-Oriente Film Workshop in Vienna—and even through partnerships with other organizations that support mentorship, such as Chicken and Egg Pictures, which provides women documentary filmmakers with numerous programs and grant opportunities. A third sector of community engagement and activity, which is perhaps more difficult to define, involves special projects that might be ongoing or one-time events. One example is a new partnership with Indiegogo, a Web-based funding platform that serves the independent film industry and other areas of the arts like dance, design, theater, and transmedia projects. WMM currently runs a beta program on Indiegogo, through which filmmakers can raise money from public donations to complete their films and create "buzz" around their projects and outreach campaigns.<sup>60</sup> Significantly, Indiegogo, unlike

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<sup>60</sup> See <http://www.indiegogo.com/partners/wmms>

Kickstarter, may be used by filmmakers outside the U.S., which reflects yet another way that WMM is seeking to be more accessible internationally.

Finally, Zimmerman's highly visible, active role in the circuits and industries of independent film promotes both WMM as an organization and women filmmakers more broadly. She has served as a festival juror, panelist, or given master classes countless times at numerous festivals, including Sundance Film Festival, MIPDOC (a major annual international showcase for documentary in Cannes), and Reel Screen Film Festival, as well as film festivals in Europe, Africa, Asia and South America; she hosted the high-profile "Talk of the Day" at International Documentary Film Festival Amsterdam (IDFA); and has received numerous awards honors herself including, most recently, the Doc Mogul Award from Toronto Hot Docs in 2013, the Muse Award from New York Women in Film and Television (NYWIFT) in 2012, the Good Egg Award from Chicken and Egg Pictures in 2012, and the IMPACT Award from Sarasota Film Festival in 2012. She also maintains close relationships with a number of professors and is often invited to present at academic conferences.

Recently, B. Ruby Rich identified what WMM has accomplished as "a branding of the organization as a global crossroads for a transnational feminist media."<sup>61</sup> But Zimmerman's leadership has been immeasurably influential. She not only reorganized and revitalized WMM's internal operations and streamlined an efficient business model that still serves a feminist mission, but she is also very much a face of North American feminist film out in the world. She is a strong leader at WMM and U.S.-based film festivals and conferences, and an advocate for women filmmakers and feminist media out in the world, at scores of international film festivals

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<sup>61</sup> B. Ruby Rich, "The Confidence Game," *Camera Obscura* 28.1 (Spring 2013): 162.

and events. WMM, too, operates in this two-fold fashion: it is both a prominent face of feminist film in the U.S., and the face of U.S. feminist film out in the world.

Sustaining feminist film culture at WMM involves both maintaining a trove of 550-plus titles from post-1960s feminist history and continuously expanding a vision of what constitutes the imagery of a global feminist cinema, including numerous films from the U.S. and all over the world. This has implications for how we think, write, and teach about ideas like transnational feminist cinema, imagining the other, visualizing feminist solidarity, and the future of feminist film studies and practices. There is a tendency to focus scholarly discussions of transnational feminist media, in particular, on issues of film form, authorship, and more generally on issues related to content rather than context. These are important considerations, but there are still hierarchies of power and influence, echelons of prestige, and mechanisms of visibility that shape the access to and reception of independent cinema. Discussing these issues is beyond the scope of this brief conclusion, but I point to them as possible directions for future research. What is urgently needed, I think, is more sustained critical attention to financing structures for independent film, especially comparative approaches, and to the circuits and platforms through which global women's cinema is projected and discussed—namely, international documentary and women's film festivals, academic conferences and events, international media marketplaces, digital streaming platforms, and other expanding venues for making and seeing independent media. In the meantime, WMM continues to hold onto its original 1969 name—Women Make Movies—as a kind of political statement and enduring expression of feminist self-determination.



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